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**Descriptions of descriptions.****(Suspended) exercises of written architecture**

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**Abstract**

Since its pre-classical antecedents, the whole history of architectural thought has been characterised by a descriptive literary form. Though not exhaustive in defining the role and cognitive task of the discipline, the description – as an analytical device – is one of the favourite operative tools of architecture and this is true not just nowadays, at the time of *storytelling*, but has always been so since ancestral times. A long tradition can definitely be traced, whom only recently a name has been given to, perhaps on the wave of that predisposition to self-reflection of architecture on herself, inaugurated with the century of Enlightenment, specified in the Short Twentieth Century and become today *way of thinking*.

**Key-words**

Description — Architectural design — Architecture

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Since its pre-classical antecedents, the whole history of architectural thought has been characterised by a descriptive literary form, clearly differing from history or criticism and their philological practices. It is a sort of speculative exercise that draws indirectly from the tradition of the Justinian era *ekphraseis*<sup>1</sup> (Kruft 1988, pp. 19-32), whose model are the Philostratus' *Imagines* of the II-III century AD: by describing sixty-four paintings adorning the portico of a villa near Naples, the author inaugurated the genre of the literary museum and gave shape to the no longer resolved conflict between word and image – declined in the following centuries according to the well-known Orazio's formula *ut pictura poesis*.

We could retrace the history of this practice and its particular fortune in the architectural field, starting from the descriptions of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem contained in the Old Testament<sup>2</sup> to the Tschumi and Koolhaas formal exercises, up to contemporaneity and beyond; it could be possible to identify the typical traits as well as the differences and ambiguities of this genre, practiced by architects and critics as well as by historians, but often also by poets and writers and even by artists – in different guises, but still in a “narrative” form. The *Bird's-Eye View of Paris* given by Victor Hugo, characterised by the presence of multiple glances and an evident taste for the excess, anticipates the imaginative visions of the postmodern city, or even the park of Eduard and Charlotte's *Elective Affinities* and the mastery with which Goethe traces the “pictorial views” concealing the premonitory signs of subsequent events<sup>3</sup>.

Though not exhaustive in defining the role and cognitive task of the discipline, the description – as an analytical device – is one of the favourite operative tools of architecture and this is true not just nowadays, at the time



**Fig. 1**  
Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965.

of *storytelling*, but has always been so since ancestral times. A long tradition can definitely be traced, whom only recently a name has been given to, perhaps on the wave of that predisposition to self-reflection of architecture on herself, inaugurated with the century of Enlightenment, specified in the Short Twentieth Century and become today *way of thinking*.

The term *description* indicates both the act of describing and its content. In the sense that we want to consider here, describing is the way architects use to outline their field of investigation: it is a critical work on the reasons of the art, a concrete reflection on the tools of the profession and their usage. The *description* is both a cognitive moment, an analytical device and a technical representation; through the description a process is determined, which presupposes unity between object of observation and modality of the narration or, on the contrary, which operates for discrepancies and deviations.

The history of the architectural description as a “genre”, is complex and comparable to that of literary description. Moreover, like the latter, it plays on a double register: that of the genre itself – a complex labyrinth of *descriptions of descriptions*<sup>4</sup> – and the cognitive one, an only apparently neutral moment (as a product of analysis and observation), but in reality deeply conditioned by the viewpoint of the person who is describing: a sort of meta-text (perhaps meta-architecture) that makes architecture herself the object of the narration, a technique managed by architecture herself in order to stage, represent and speak of herself. Either a discourse developed through designing or, from opposite points of view – but often coincident – a written text in architectural guise.

Yet this intrinsically hermeneutical disposition of architectural descriptions requires an explanation. Unlike what may not happen in literature, where the question of the relationship between *fabula* and *plot* would arise, as well as the doubt that the role of the description is inevitably subaltern to that of the narration, in the architectural field the descriptive practices and variations of the genre over time show a close relationship with the elaboration of the design tools, according to their concrete application (Corbellini, 2016). This means that their meaning originates from the theory of architecture they refer to, as well as from the techniques of the project from time to time employed. Architects often describe objects that later play an active role within design practices, figures capable of triggering unconscious automatisms closely linked to compositional mechanisms; in this sense, analytical processes condition the relationship between description and project, producing, in some cases, a sort of project folding in the

analysis, in some deterministic ways, sometimes, on the contrary, activating virtuous circles in which the intelligibility of the project is built within an imaginative process applied to known figures. Subsequently, it could be superfluous to observe how the “rigorous and magnificent” volume raising above the cube of the novice hall, a crooked pyramid in the centre of the cloister of La Tourette, a volume capable of “playing masterly in light” is actually inseparable from the views of Le Corbusier’s sculptor art of Thoronet; the same applies to the walkway on the roof, with such a high perimeter wall to mark the line of a horizon that refers to other places, where, just as in Thoronet’s sunny Provence, one can meditate, in front of nature, closer to God.

Although much has been said and written about what may be, in such cases, the distinction between description and interpretation, between imagination and repetition, perhaps little has been said on how the description made by Le Corbusier of “his” Thoronet and the narrative process used to put it on stage has affected his project in Éveux.

So then, here it is how that descriptive gesture, which in architecture seemed to be very distant from the productive terms of the project, becomes the design moment, whereas the description assumes a more properly compositional role in the structure of literary narration.

We would like to investigate here how this happens and what purpose it is aimed to, since in many cases the only story we are told is that of the project (or its reasons).

And yet, regarding the meaning and the value of the description: if in literature they often coincide with a digression that assumes a specific role in the economy of the story – by introducing secondary characters and parallel stories or by contributing to characterize the protagonists – how intensely then do the descriptions participate in the definition of the project? This is in fact what we are going to investigate here, that is, if the moment of the description coincides with that of designing and how such coincidence is realized.

Descriptions are mostly part of the cognitive process – in its rational sense and perhaps also in other, less easily codifiable, meanings; they contribute to identify the character of the described object which, while maintaining that the object exists on his own, it is modified by the eye of the person who looks at it and by the vision of the world of those who describe. In fact, describing signifies for instance knowing the objects through their interpretation, but it implies at the same time the ability to identify the object’s typical and essential traits, distinguishing them from the accessory and secondary ones, or vice versa to insist on the latter ones.

Actually, observation and interpretation coexist in the descriptive practice, albeit in different ways from time to time.

For some one the final purpose of the description is the description itself, namely to openly reveal its content and the logical structure of its construction. In this sense, Giorgio Grassi assimilates the description to the analytical classifying processes and to the modalities for organizing facts, classifying objects and comparing the different elements: the description is built up and makes people aware of its own significance through the form it exhibits. Since lacking a status comparable to that of literary descriptions in the development of a story, although it may seem apparently tautological, the meaning and legitimacy of architectural description lies in the specific identification of connotations often taken for granted, as the result of simple observation, and in their exposure in a rational way. According

**Fig. 2**

Les affinités électives, 1996, directed by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani.

to Grassi, from a cognitive point of view architectural descriptions are made significant by a rational display ordering of concepts and a congruous enunciation in relation to a broader cognitive framework<sup>5</sup>.

A architecture constructed in a logical form: «[...] the term “description” [...] will be used to designate those works in which the cognitive purpose openly prevails over the object of study» (Grassi, 1967, pp. 38-39).

From this point of view, the objects being investigated belong to a communal repertoire and so their interpretation, as well as the criteria that lead their description, are linked to a specific theory of architecture – and of the city – and moreover to a theory of the architectural project: «The analysis carried out on architecture (e.g., classifications) identifies those elements that become vital to the *composition* throughout the process. I believe that this comparison between analysis and architectural project, between *elements of architecture* and *elements of composition* is essential to architecture, to her knowledge and her comprehension» (Grassi, 1980, p. 55). The validity of the analytical procedure in relation to the project lies in this, their “common cognitive purpose”, at least according to the accredited cultural tradition that is based on studies on the theory of architecture and the city, which flourished in Italy during the Sixties and Seventies.

However, although applied to a known object – or given for known, the result of a “good description” is nevertheless by its nature original within this vision of architecture: if not the object itself, at least the logic and criteria of the description are in fact independent from the object described and therefore the result of the cognitive process is somewhat unpredictable. Though on a divergent level, such a peculiar declination of the relationship between project and analysis is specific to Aldo Rossi, and yet somewhat in common with that of Grassi: «In describing architecture, I have always tried to refer the description back to the design» (Rossi, 1981, p. 51). With his Milanese and Zurich students, Rossi himself insisted on the importance of the “describability” of the architectural project, meaning with this an intrinsic characteristic of the artistic product, a specific quality of the project developed by rational means: «[...] this way of conceiving architecture returns continually in the ancient and modern masters, almost obsessively in the writings of Adolf Loos who declares that architecture can be described but can not be drawn: on the contrary, this character of logical formulation that allows description is distinctive of great architecture: the Pantheon can be described, Secession buildings cannot» (Rossi, 1968, p. 128). As in many others Rossi’s statements, here as well the «need to verbalise clearly



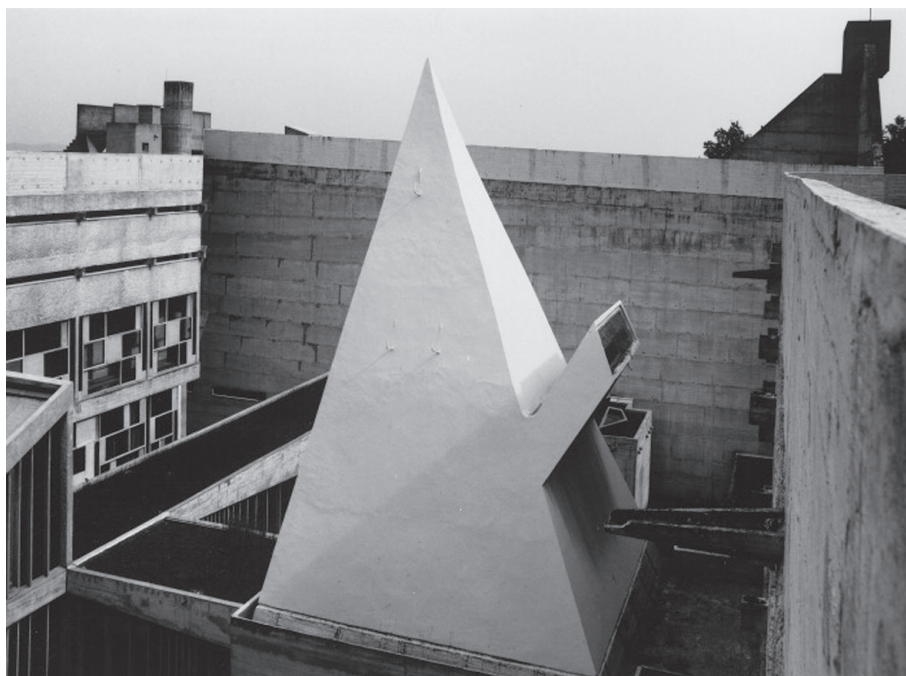
**Fig. 3**

Thoronet Abbey, Provence,  
1160-1230.



**Fig. 4**

Le Corbusier, Sainte Marie de  
La Tourette Monastery, 1953-  
60, cloister. Photography by Tim  
Benton.





**Fig. 5**

Eduardo Souto de Moura, House for three families, Quinta do Lago, Algarve, 1984.

from which architecture [the architectures stem]» is superimposed on the need to say «how [he has] made some of [his] architecture» (Rossi, 1966, p. 4) and in such overlapping, though vague and indefinite, description and self-description tend to be superimposed or coincide (Bonfanti, 1970, pp. 19-20; Savi, 1976, pp. 141-152): theoretical conceits and project description, writings and drawings actually belong to the same genre – architectural and literary at the same time. The project description, or rather the attempt to say «how [he has] made some of [his] architecture», nourished by the Rossi's practice of self-description, experience the extreme possibilities of such research on objects (and on process), until they trace unpublished and unexpected (written) spaces, variations and repetitions of a single “general construction”. The names of the projects are indeed clues: *Locomotive 2*, *The Blue of the Sky* (and *The Chutes and Ladders*), *Trieste and a Woman*, *The Hot Life*, *The Theatre of the World* or even, in tribute to Roussel and surrealist friends, *Théâtre Rouge* or *Club des Incomparables*. In such an atmospheric and imaginative “discourse on things”, logical rigor dissolves into a similar perspective, within which the solute remains clearly visible although at the bottom. Boullée and Loos, Cézanne and Wittgenstein are fellow travellers along the same path.

Following Bonfanti and Savi's example then, one might ask how much has been present since the beginning and how much has sedimentation over time, whereas it is possible to separate the (logic) description from (biographical) self-description and how much the two moments can *compensate* or rather *add up* (Bonfanti, 1970, p.20). In fact, if Loos undoubtedly maintained: «I have no need whatsoever to draw my designs. Good architecture, how something is to be built, can be written. One can write the Parthenon» (Loos, 1924), Rossi, who does not hesitate to quote him on the same issues, admits instead that «[...] run[ning] through things or impressions, [...] describe[ing] them, or find[ing] a way to do so» (Rossi, 1981, p. 1) can sometimes reveal itself as extremely difficult.

On the basis of such considerations, we could assert that, in general, *observation*, *classification* and *comparison* refer to procedures typical of the scientific method as they perform interpretative tasks; but their application in architecture and, consequently, the descriptive practices analyzed here, are based on the sedimentation of materials – disciplinary or not – and their continuous coming out again in different forms and moments; like in literary description, even in the architectural one analogy and imagination intervene altering the (scientific) investigation of the real to open to the reflection on the work and its making, the multiple and the possible.

Each description appears as compact and unitary, so as to imply an intrinsic fragmentation of reality or at least of the disciplinary *corpus*, since the univocal determination of objects collides with the accumulation of elements and their meanings or, in other cases, with the plurality of the interpretations, according to «that swirling infinity of elements» to which Pasolini refers (1979, p. 485).

Moving along to the literary field, for example regarding Flaubert's descriptions, an analogue discourse can be traced, not so much in relation to the text itself – narrative in the specific case, but also to architectural “texts” – or better to the thought that the text itself reveals through the description. Unlike the previous literary forms of expression ranging from Homer to Balzac, aimed at reconstructing the unity of the overall picture, in Flaubert we witness the deflagration of the accomplished and reassuring space of the *Ancien Régime* to represent the loss of meaning that character-



**Fig. 6**

Le Corbusier, Sainte Marie de La Tourette Monastery, 1953-60, view from the roof. Photography by Olivier Martin-Gambier, 2004. © FLC/ADAGP.

ized the modern world, after 1848. Accumulating narrative elements is no longer functional to the unit of the story, but it gets so deep as to reproduce social contradictions in writing; it is rather a deconstructive description, so much to make one of his contemporaries say: «Flaubert's style is the description, an infinite description, eternal, atomistic, blinding, which occupies all of his book [...]»<sup>6</sup>.

We see how the descriptions represent both the awareness of the object investigated and at the same time its *re-presentation*, so as to produce a kind of transfiguration, a real interpretation.

Translation, transcription and betrayal are intrinsic moments of the descriptive activity. And if it is true that «translation takes place between different languages, but also within the same language, between different types of speech, often more idiosyncratic than vocabulary and grammar. And, even more, between forms of content transmitted by different expressive substances» (Fabbri and Marrone, 2001, pp. 361-362), then we must remember that «translating is rather contest and contrast than fidelity to the original work»<sup>7</sup> since the Renaissance.

One may suppose that description and betrayal have, in architecture, a similar relationship to the one existing between analysis and project: in fact description and survey (which is a typical disciplinary tool of representation) presuppose a subjective point of view, an immediate betrayal of the objectivity and nonetheless of the presumed objectivity, thus admitting a plurality of possible interpretations.

The apparently typical central plan of Palladio's La Rotonda, so clearly described in terms of geometric correspondences and classical compositional principles by Rudolf Wittkower (1999, pp. 72-77), is transformed in the disturbing *physical* and *psychic trauma* due to the labyrinthine multiplicity of an image continually reflected in the mirror by Bernard Tschumi (1994, p. 124).

Take Palladio's Villa Rotonda. You walk through one of its axes, and as you cross the central space and reach its other side you find, instead of the hillside landscape, the steps of another Villa Rotonda, and another, and another, and another. The incessant repetition at first stimulates some strange desire, but soon becomes sadistic, impossible, violent. Such discomfiting spatial devices can take any form: the white anechoic chambers of sensory deprivation, the formless spaces leading to psycho-

**Fig. 7**

Double page of 1964 Rudolf Wittkower's book, *Architectural principles in the age of humanism*.



51. Palladio, *La Rotonda a Vicenza*, 1550.



52. Palladio, *La Malcontenta a Mira*, 1560.

**Fig. 8**

*Don Giovanni*, 1979, directed by Joseph Losey. View of Palladio's Villa La Rotonda surrounded by the lagoon.





logical destructuring. Steep and dangerous staircases, those corridors consciously made too narrow for crowds, introduce a radical shift from architecture as an object of contemplation to architecture as a perverse instrument of use.

Moreover, in Tschumi the physical trauma of the architectural multiplicity mirroring itself substitutes the classical order and the dignified equilibrium of the cubic volume with the four juxtaposed pronais, whereas in Losey's film adaptation of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the characters move in a Rotonda bordered by water, within a scenic interpretation that totally reinterprets the topography of the building to sink it into the misty atmosphere of the lagoon<sup>8</sup>. That of Losey is a third vision of La Rotonda which is no less true than the previous two nor even of that in bricks and mortar built on the hills behind Vicenza: simply another Villa La Rotonda or at least one of the possible Villas in the complex plot of its descriptions. The very same object and building participates into different interpretative levels, and so it changes according to its description like in *different repetitions*, each reliable and essential, but at the same time provisional. And so, the great many descriptions of a building contribute to its deconstruction, to the demolition (and therefore multiplication) of possibilities, as it happens both with the Palladian work and, in literature, with the Goethian novel, if I may paraphrase Jakob.

However, in order to avoid taking the risk of a defeat of both thought and discipline, but considering the complexity that the "postmodern condition" has advanced about the substantial multiplicity of possible interpretations, we might apparently go back to the tradition of *critical realism*, which interprets objectivity as always mediated by a theory, or that of *critical rationalism*, hypothesizing the need for a new *minimal realism* (Eco, 2012), capable of not smoothing the different layers of reality on a single level, but to reason for differences and overlaps.

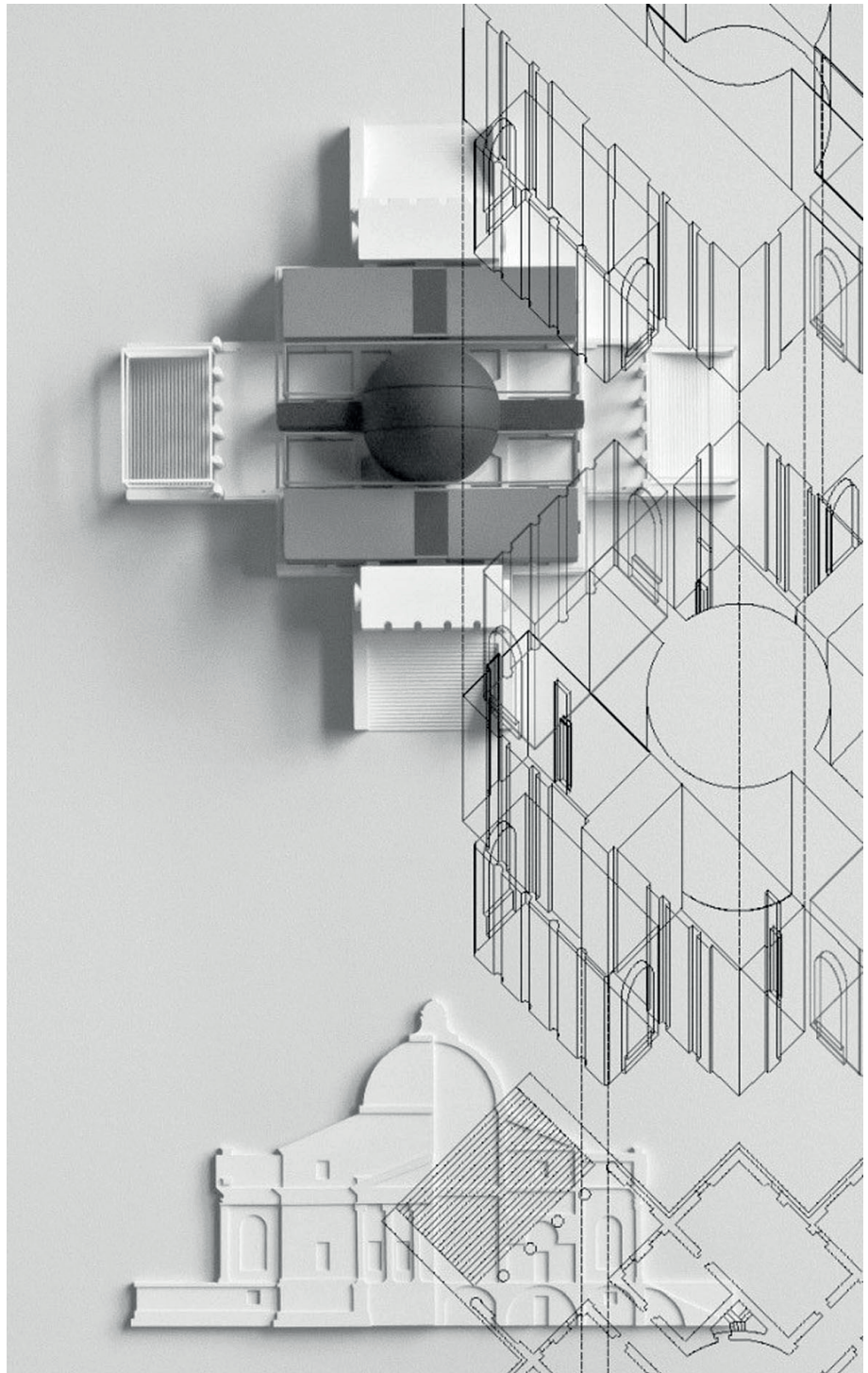
One and more Villa La Rotonda, then.

Indeed, the first is more true – if there is any sort of order at all, the one materially built following Palladio's project (which in reality, as reported in *The four books of Architecture*, shows us yet another, albeit only a little, different, La Rotonda), precisely because the others contribute to unveil the intrinsic values of the first one and to show its implicit possibilities, the unsaid or what still remains to be said.

However, so far we have in a certain way supported, not sharing the positions of an excessively orthodox realism, that an object or better their interpretation changes according to the investigator's point of view; but how can we agree with Loos on the fact that: «Can the Pantheon be described, Secession buildings no»? That is to say: how much do the characters of the object itself count? And, to follow Eco, are there "bad interpretations"?<sup>9</sup>. Every "good interpretation" seems to presuppose a sort of adherence to the form to be interpreted, a certain sense of loyalty or, in other words, of intellectual honesty not only towards the examined object, but even with respect of the cognitive process and the subject of study – admitting therefore in some cases also the possibility of counterfeiting the interpretation itself. In spite of all of this, we still may question what elements allow architecture to be describable or vice versa, which ones establish its definitive indescribability and especially whether this condition is linked to the cognitive dimension or not. Though oversimplifying, Eco stated that «there are some things that cannot be said», so why should this not be applied to architecture as well? Moreover, though agreeing on this, if we

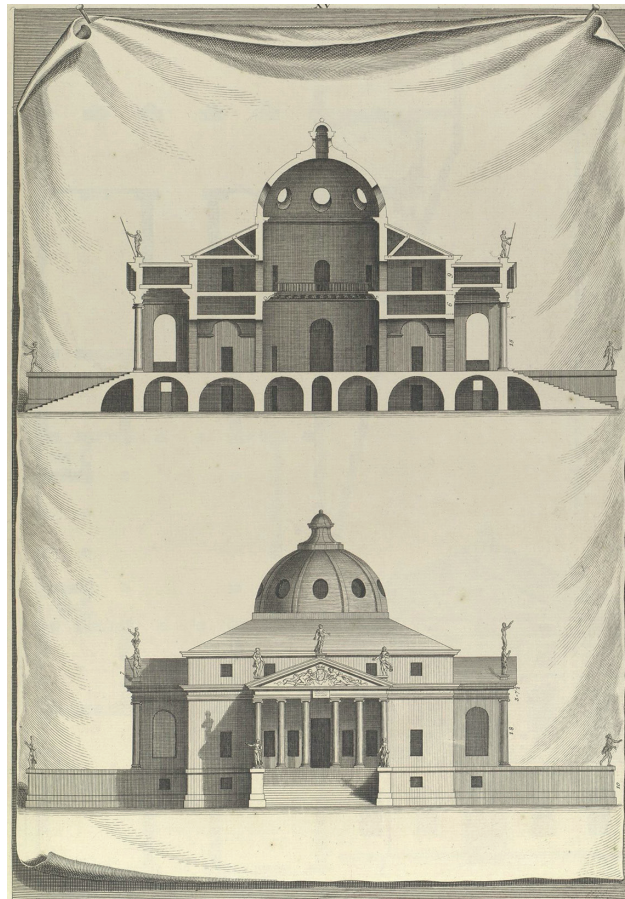
**Fig. 9**

Peter Eisenman and Matt Roman, Palladio Virtuel Exhibition, Yale School of Architecture, 20 August - 27 October 2012. © Peter Eisenman, Matt Roman.



**Fig. 10**

Andrea Palladio, La Rotonda, 1550 (from *The Architecture of A. Palladio in Four Books containing a Short Treatise on the Five Orders*, edition curated by Giacomo Leoni, engraved by Bernard Picart, London, 1715).



asked ourselves which things cannot be done, what would the answer be? While quoting Loos in his discourse about the possibility for architecture to be “describable”, Rossi does not refer so much to a secret practice which requires learning how to refine one’s own speaking skills, but rather to a specific quality of the project – and therefore of the object itself, which includes the possibility of being described and therefore universally knowable, within which, according to a vision that is perhaps ideal, but certainly democratic, everything (the architectural content) is available to everybody: this is true for the Parthenon, for Losey and Palladio’s La Rotonda, but perhaps it is less true for Tschumi’s one.

What is architecture? Shall I join Vitruvius in defining it as the art of building? Indeed, no, for there is a flagrant error in this definition. Vitruvius mistakes the effect for the cause. One must conceive in order to realise. Our earliest ancestors only built their huts after having conceived the image thereof. It is this production of the mind, this creation that is constitutive of architecture, which we may consequently define as the art of producing and bringing to perfection edifices of all kinds. The art of building is therefore only a secondary art, which it seems to us to be appropriate to call the scientific portion of architecture. Art in the strict sense, and science, these are the notions that we believe should be marked out distinctly in architecture.

According to Boullée (1974, p. 83), this viewpoint seems to imply that architecture can only adhere to one single rigorous procedure that, starting from known images, does not refer her own representation and therefore her own explanation to any other instruments but to the architectural ones. So we are not looking for a purely narrative description that tries to capture experience manifesting itself, not even descriptive architectures that seek to give the elusive condition of reality a fixed shape. The significance of forms, their possibility of being described even in a



plurality of interpretations, belongs to the possibility of unfolding such a meaning, telling its reasons and showing its connections – in the best possible way or, if this is not possible, in the only way given to us.

«I do not strive for knowing everything, but for being able to unify what is fragmented. It is almost certain that such an endeavor is doomed to fail. However, even the slightest chance that it may succeed justifies every effort»<sup>10</sup>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> «Ècfrasi (or ècfrasis; also èkphrasis) s. f. [adaptation, or transliteration of the Greek ἔκφρασις, derived from ἐκφράζω, “to expose, to describe; describe with elegance”]. The Greek rhetoricians attributed this name to the virtuous, elaborate description of an object, of a person or to the circumstantial exposition of an event, and more particularly to the description of places and works of art; the style is characterized by virtuosity in order to compete in expressive force with the very object described» ([www.treccani.it](http://www.treccani.it))

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. *I Re*, 6, 1-38 e *Ezechiele*, 40-42.

<sup>3</sup> As brilliantly noted by Michael Jakob (2005, p. 223), the unsullied atmosphere of the Goethian landscape defines itself in open opposition to the aesthetic vision of the romantic garden and its untamed “creators”: «As far as the landscape is concerned, Goethe’s novel is charged with [...] great importance, because all the illusions of an aesthetic existential praxis are unmasked within it. The experimental structure of *Elective Affinities*, that is to say, the orientation of life towards panoramic seductions, represents an extraordinarily precise “lens” through which the landscape cult is closely observed. The Goethian novel unfolds the construction of a landscape as deconstruction, demolition of possibilities. The multiple aesthetisation of life (reading, writing, drawing, designing, building), whose crowning glory lies in the constructions of landscape architecture, is unmasked in its contradictory character».

<sup>4</sup> «I have provided some “descriptions”. Here it is, this is all I know of my criticism. And then, “descriptions” of what? Of other “descriptions”, because books are nothing else, indeed. Anthropology teaches it: there is the “drómenon”, the fact that has occurred, the myth, and the “legómenon”, its oral description» (Pasolini, 1979, p. 457). In choosing the title of the present essay we wanted to refer exactly to such a clear headed description of the process of reflecting on the object of criticism, in fact our title retraces intentionally that of the posthumous collection of reviews published by Pasolini in the “Tempo” weekly publication, between November 1972 and January 1975.

<sup>5</sup> «Therefore, [...] I shall deal with descriptions in order to highlight what can be defined as the most general aim of the analysis of the rational thought, that is, the realisation of a broader intelligibility of architecture» (Grassi, 1967, p. 38).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Barbey D’Aurevilly J. (1869) – “L’Éducation sentimentale. Histoire d’un jeune homme par M. Gustave Flaubert”. *Le Constitutionnel*, 29 November 1869. «Flaubert invented new ways of describing; or even better, he fused together style and description. While his peers, like Barbey d’Aurevilly, accused him because of this, [...], nowadays such invention appears as an honest, exact intuition, and as a tribute to one of the greatest transformations imposed on narrative writing. Flaubert’s purpose is often quoted: “I would like to write a book about nothing”. About nothing, that is, what about? A book where existence coincides with beauty, where the variation evades monotony at every moment: a book where life is transformed» (Bottiroli, 2002, p. XIX).

<sup>7</sup> *Non tam reddere quam certare* (Ermolao Barbaro).

<sup>8</sup> In the 1979 film adaptation of Mozart and Da Ponte’s work, the director Joseph Losey, helped by the scenographer Alexandre Trauner, sets the whole story in Palladian buildings: «The director chose to shoot a film on such a pièce, using all the devices belonging to filmic language and realised a path with some relevant symbolic moments: within this formal grid, he then inserted the disruptive actions of Don Giovanni. All of this work was set up in silent, composed but also melancholic Palladian Veneto, a little lost in the middle of nowhere. The effect created is that of a

film which [...] opens a complex overview on human action, which also contemplates the possibility that certain threads are held back by destiny» (Colazzo, 2002, p. 66).

<sup>9</sup> «According to the hermeneutical principle stating that there are no facts but only interpretations, we cannot rule out the possibility that there may be “bad interpretations”. [...] By now, everyone seems to agree on the fact that the real problem of any “deconstructive” argumentation of the classical concept of truth is not to demonstrate the fallacy at the basis of our reasoning: the world as we represent it, is certainly an effect of interpretation [...]. The problem rather deals with protecting us when trying out a new paradigm that others might recognise as delirious, pure imagination of the impossible. Which criterion allows us to distinguish between dream, poetic invention, lysergic acid trip [...] and acceptable statements when attempting an interpretation of the objects enlivening the physical or historical world around us? [...] Hence the idea of a Negative Realism that could be summarised, both speaking of texts and aspects of the world, in the formula: any interpretative hypothesis is always appealable [...] but, if one can never definitively say whether an interpretation is right, you can always say when it is wrong. Indeed, some interpretations are not allowed by the object itself» (Eco, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Canetti 1973, p. 55.

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