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The Future Is Unwritten

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L'AMPLIAMENTO
 DELLA CAMERA
 DEI DEPUTATI

Letture e prospettive per il progetto



Letture e Progetto

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«In the near or distant future, when someone comes to retell the story of postwar Italian architecture competitions, it will not be too difficult to pick out a handful of recurring themes: the failure of culturally significant proposals, awards shared equally between the most far-fetched solutions and in the end, more often than not, plans that come to nothing.»¹ These were the opening words of *Il concorso per i nuovi uffici della Camera dei Deputati. Un bilancio dell'architettura italiana*; since then, the number of methodical, in-depth studies or academic articles regarding the competition for the enlargement of the Chamber of Deputies in 1967 have been few and far between. A well-known yet forgotten story that was consumed - in a sense completely - at the very moment of its conclusion. A story that we know everything about, yet which we continuously reinterpret from the same points of view. These are the points of view of political criticism, of those who seek to underline the unbridgeable distance between power and architecture in Italian culture, and of view of Manfredo Tafuri, who was assigned to produce the account of the dealings of the competition - the aerial photo of Rome, which, not by chance I would say, is the first image used by the curators in their introduction, is also the same beautiful view that the Roman historian used to open his book on the results of the competition at the beginning of '68. *L'Ampliamento della Camera dei Deputati. Letture e prospettive per il progetto*, which is part of the limited available literature, attempts to break free from the rut alluded to earlier, to a certain extent.

But, to understand the nature of, and above all the interest generated by this work, it is necessary to ask ourselves a question. What significance does this affair have for us today? While browsing through its pages I could not help but ask myself, and I think there are two answers to this question, that is to say, the volume itself offers two answers. The first answer is explicit, and can be found in the preface to the work, as well as the editors' introduction. To reflect on the tools used to transform the historical city through a case study carried out fifty years on, and try to draw positive conclusions on the project of the new within the ancient. Thus it is not merely the draft of a definitive critical evaluation, a term that characterised the subtitle to Tafuri's volume, that moves researchers and PhD students to reflect, but the search for principles and values that allow us to tackle the project and the

new perspectives. At this point, however, a second question arises. Why reflect on the contemporary project within the context of the historical city through the lens of an event that - to develop a theme that is also present in the volume itself - possibly even from the moment the initial call to tender was drawn up, amounted to little more than a renouncement? Why dwell on such a controversial case when one could take valuable contemporary projects within historic cities like Paris or Vienna as case studies? When the projects submitted during the competition, even if only those of the 18 winners are taken into account, as acknowledged in the volume, were not at the same level as the contemporary international experimentations? What's certain is that the knot - a term to be understood its twofold sense of place and event - consisting of the palace of power and the '67 competition represents an event of particular importance in Italian history; but it's more than this. In the second of his four published volumes on *Considerazioni Inattuali*, Friedrich Nietzsche recognises the usefulness of history solely as a story acting as a creative force, as opposed to the idea of a history as a paralysing force, as harmful to the life of Man. And although the debate on the usefulness of history reappears periodically, even in architecture, I think we can be considered in unanimous agreement on the validity of this assumption. History as a creative force. In this assumption lies the second answer, which is probably stated less explicitly, but which emerges strongly from the text.

Hefty outcome of three different research seminars conducted within the Doctorate in Architecture and Construction, the volume is influenced by its didactic genesis and is organized into three parts, whose nature is clearly denounced by the names of the sections themselves: a first review of critical essays, contributions, ad work of scholars and researchers reflecting on some theoretical and methodological nodes, and a second and third part, readings and cards, whose names refer with great agility to the almost instrumental nature of these sections e themselves: the first, a review of critical essays and contributions by scholars and researchers reflecting on various theoretical and methodological issues, and the second and third part, readings and charts whose names recall skilfully the almost instrumental nature of these sections, and which represent the sensitive results of the research seminars, while proposing a reflection concentrated on the project itself. Each section of the book has its own autonomy, the parts of which are - are in their entirety and within each of them - to a certain extent disconnected in the text but kept together by intentions. And although such a fragmentary nature could make one think of a clear division of theses (between the chapters), this is not the case; it is difficult, and perhaps counterproductive, to attempt to associate a single thesis with a given section of the text.

As a whole, the contributions and charts represent the collection of reflections that can lead to positive knowledge about the project in the historical city. And whereas the first section deals almost by leaps, through the intervention of scholars and researchers, with issues related to the architectural culture of the 1960s and the intervention in the historical context as well as the morphological reading of the historical city and project tools, the third and last section of the book consists of studies and original charts elaborated for subsequent comparisons, comparative readings and rigorous analyses - probably the most rigorous and perhaps scientific part of the entire book which, in some of its expressions, acquires an almost technical-administrative nature - and that tries to answer some instrumental

questions. What idea of a palace of power? What are the most convincing examples developed in recent years? How to evaluate them? How to write a public announcement for an architectural context today? These questions are given an answer that is, in part, already a project.

If the contributions and charts are therefore composed as the most solid results of the text, it is instead in the readings that, accepting some undeniable ingenuity, one can find the most interesting section of the book. Not because the texts written by PhD students inaugurate new research threads on the individual designer protagonists of the competition, or because of the use of unpublished sources that may allow original interpretations, but because, even in their recognised lack of homogeneity, the short writings that make up this the second part of the book - if grasped as a whole, alternating reporting and storytelling - encapsulate the writing of a possible story. Investigating what has not happened opens up, almost independently, a reflection on what could have happened, on what other projects could have been developed. One, perhaps implicit, opening to the future, a possible story that is almost in contrast to a story that has not happened, linked to a period when everything, or almost everything, seemed possible.

As a whole, all the research that underlies the writing of *L'Ampliamento della Camera dei Deputati* is a search for the future and in this lies, I feel I can assert, the merit of such readings, contributions and charts. A research that would like to move, overestimating perhaps - but this is not necessarily an evil - the effects that the work of the scientific community is able to generate in Italy on that of politics, a situation of immobility because of which, where that "urban wreck" between Via di Campo Marzio and Via della Missione" lies, all we see today is a sad, high enclosure beyond which a metal car park resides; everything would make one think of a temporary structure, but this is not the case.

But, citing a documentary of about ten years ago, *The Future Is Unwritten*².

Notes

¹ Tafuri M., *Il concorso per i nuovi uffici della Camera dei Deputati. Un bilancio dell'architettura italiana*, Edizioni universitarie italiane, Venice 1968, p. 9.

² *The Future Is Unwritten* - Joe Strummer (2008) directed by Julien Temple. A choral documentary on the life of guitarist Joe Strummer.