

Giuseppe Tupputi  
**The metropolitan architectures of Paulo Mendes da Rocha.**  
**Between spatial conception and structural design**

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Author: *Carlo Gandolfi*

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Carlo Gandolfi, in the book *Matter of Space. City and architecture in Paulo Mendes da Rocha*, investigates deeply the concept of space in architecture, understanding it in the double meaning expressed in the title itself by the use of the word *matter*, which refers both to the spatial *question* and *substance*<sup>1</sup>. The author, within this general field of investigation, by declaring his interest in a *modus operandi* that «builds [...] a solid theoretical itinerary through the practice of architecture»<sup>2</sup>, decides to deal with the thought and the work of Paulo Mendes da Rocha and to deepen above all the theme of the collective building project. This choice allows him to turn his critical view towards the discussion of the spatial matter «in its double meaning at the scale of architecture and the city»<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, as Gandolfi explains, for Mendes da Rocha the relationship between building and city places itself within a precise political and cultural point of view that, standing itself upstream of the design practices, coincides with a clear intentionality – a precise conception of the world – in which the architectural space is imagined as a *great collective shelter*, as the expression of a «social project [...], where everyone accepts the co-existence with others, without solid walls, but within new and sought after conditions of human respect»<sup>4</sup>.

Sharing this point of view, the author articulates his treatise by following a logical chain that is cleverly expressed through the development of a cyclical itinerary: a round trip from the city to architecture and, vice versa, from architecture to the city.

The first chapters of the volume assess the main spatial characteristics that connote the contemporary metropolis, of which San Paolo represents an emblematic case. In addition to highlighting its immense extension, Gandolfi also observes the high degree of introversion and entropy of urban spaces. This is the result of a constructive practice which, through a «*doing without figure*», reduces the expressiveness of architecture to a «*word without myth*»<sup>5</sup> and which, through a «vivacious proliferation of signs», generates a «perceptive callosity»<sup>6</sup> in the experience of the metropolis.

In architectural-spatial words, these conditions turn, on the one hand, into the need for public places capable of competing with the large metropolitan scale and, on the other, into the need for collective buildings characterized by a representative architectural language. In other words, these conditions

involve the research of an idea of monumentality based on the eloquence of architecture, which is capable of unequivocally expressing – within the work itself – the relationship between the idea of space underlying the project and its built forms.

In Mendes da Rocha's work, the *concept* of space has its roots in the civil ideal of wanting to release, in the chaotic flow of metropolitan space, a large urban place with a powerful collective sense and capable of freely offering itself to everyone.

At the same time, the space meant as *substance* - and all the architectural elements that conform it - is always based on a structural ideation<sup>7</sup>. As in a game of correspondences, the technical forms of construction become a «vehicle of the [...] spatial form»<sup>8</sup> of the building, which is modeled on architectural ideas that are based, in turn, on civil ideals conceived starting from the problematization of the relationship with the city: «*the idea is linked to the expression as the form is linked to the structure*»<sup>9</sup>.

In this sense, the structural elegance of Mendes da Rocha's buildings is intended as the result of the search for an audacious lightness; a lightness that however takes on a strong conceptual weight because it expresses through its corporeity the idea of freeing a space, of producing a break capable of resisting the noisy speed of the metropolis, of building a place in which to stop and stay in the shelter of architecture.

At this point, the conceptual itinerary designed by Carlo Gandolfi appears clearly on the horizon of the reader: the question consists in «understanding *how* a building can contribute to contrast the entropy and compression that dominate the contemporary urban space, which is made of shred, interruptions, scars»<sup>10</sup>. Specifically, the question consists in understanding how, in Mendes da Rocha's work, the *technical* gesture of architecture succeeds in «cutting away all parasitic senses and in presenting to the public a pure and complete meaning, round as a nature»<sup>11</sup>; thus, the question consists in gaining a consoling, reassuring dimension towards the «constitutive ambiguity»<sup>12</sup> that connotes spaces and life in the metropolis.

The conceptual categories and analytical techniques adopted for the analysis of the «*metropolitan paradigms*» chosen as case studies are carefully proportioned to this intentionality.

Gandolfi investigates the spatial contents of Mendes da Rocha's architecture through the analysis of a threefold order of relationships: between the building and the urban systems, between the internal spaces and the open spaces around the building, and between the internal spaces that make up the building itself. In addition to the three-dimensional model, through which the essentially structural nature of architecture reaches its maximum expressiveness<sup>13</sup>, the instrument preferred by the analysis is the section, intended as a device capable of reconstructing the articulation and sequence of spaces, as well as of representing its structural logics.

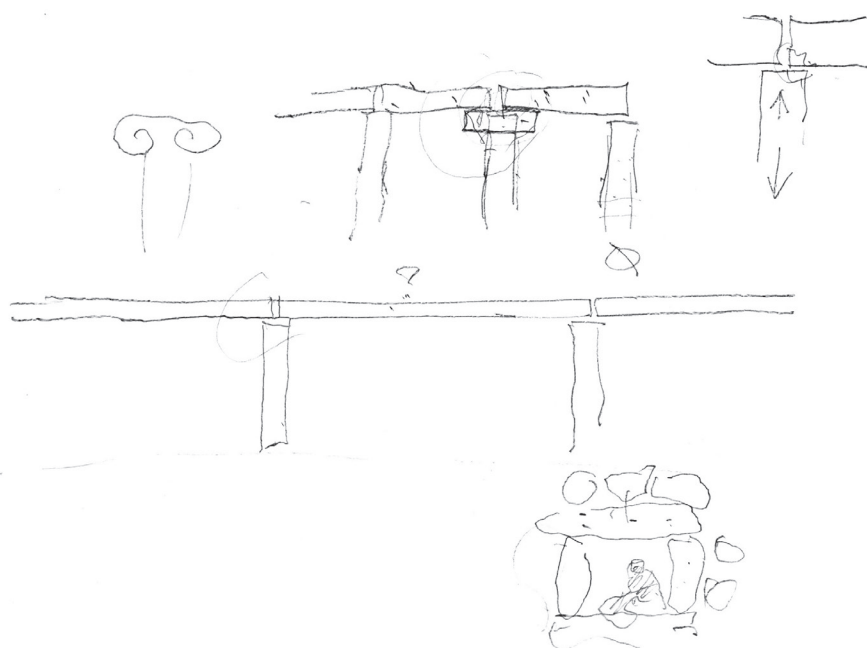
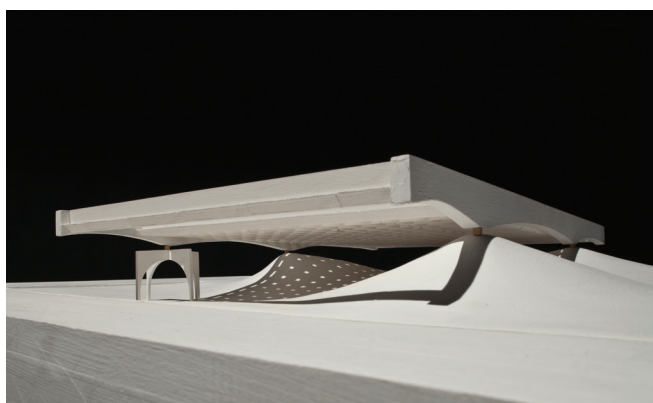
Furthermore, downstream from the analysis, Gandolfi elaborates a critical reflection around some key concepts, which are useful for understanding the constructive syntaxes of Mendes da Rocha's architectural poetics, including the *nakedness* of the structural framework (which is capable of condensing and emphatically expressing the conceptual framework of the space), the *coupling*, which is both a connection and a disconnection point (and which is investigated both in its spatial meaning and in its tectonic and structural meaning) and *proxemics*, namely the control of the distances between the elements that conform the architectural space (which is investigated within the structural logics of the building and the spatial metrics of its urban surroundings).



**Images taken from the volume**

From above

the deck of the MASP of Lina Bo Bardi in San Paolo; model of the Brazilian Pavilion at the Osaka Expo (1969-70) created by Carlo Gandolfi; Paulo Mendes da Rocha, tectonic sketches, the cap, the architrave, the shelf.



The conformation of the architectural elements is intended and investigated as the outcome of a figurative process that takes shape «not so much from the perspective of a moralistic constructive sincerity, but rather according to a narrative of the element itself which is compared with the conceptual economy of the building»<sup>14</sup>.

«For Mendes da Rocha - writes Gandolfi - architecture is a *poetic technique*»<sup>15</sup> and crossing this poetic world of tectonic construction, made up of elements, forms and connections, the journey back to the city begins.

In addition to establishing the control methods of the spatial relationships inside the building – which are structured according to a hierarchical and at the same time unitary articulation - the conformation of the architectural elements and the art of their connections also define the opening relationships, the continuity, visual permeability and physical accessibility between the internal spaces of the building and the surrounding open spaces of the city.

Finally, the expressiveness of the forms of construction lays down also the relations with the large-scale urban systems. In fact, referring to the profound civil value of architecture, Mendes da Rocha's projects seem to refer to an idea of a city made of isolated points, (or «remarkable places»). Within the expressive field offered by tectonic construction, his research is aimed at identifying the most suitable spatial and morphological characters for corresponding to the sense of the building within the city, namely for relating, interacting and modifying the places and systems of urban places where this building is located.

In this book, Carlo Gandolfi describes the ways through which Mendes da Rocha managed to assume the city and the knowledge of its deepest contrasts and its most intimate contradictions as starting point for the spatial and structural ideation (as well as for the real construction) of its architecture.

By analyzing his works and by getting close to his thought, this book opens up to a broad and deep reflection on the theoretical and methodological teaching handed down to us by the work of Mendes da Rocha: an architect whom Gandolfi fully elects to his Master, because he is able to offer us a clear point of view and some concrete operational tools to return to experience the positive transformation of the city through the practice of architecture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gandolfi C. (2018) – *Matter of Space. Città e architettura in Paulo Mendes da Rocha*, Accademia University Press, Turin, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Motta F. (1967) – “Paulo Mendes da Rocha”. *Acròpole* XXIX, 343 (september), pp. 17-45.

<sup>5</sup> Assunto R. (1984) – *La città di Anfione e la città di Prometeo. Idea e poetiche della città*, Editoriale Jaca Book, Milan, p. 149.

<sup>6</sup> Gandolfi C. (2018) – *Matter of Space*, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Moccia C. (2019) – “Apologia della costruzione”. In: Gandolfi C. e Fidone E. (ed.), *Paulo Mendes da Rocha. Spazio tettonico*, Lettera Ventidue, Syracuse 2019, pp. 25-27.

<sup>8</sup> Neumeyer F. (1996) – *Mies van der Rohe. Le architetture, gli scritti*, Skira, Milan, p. 313.

<sup>9</sup> Falasca C. C. (2007) – *Incontro con Livio Vacchini su tecnologie e cultura del progetto*, Franco Angeli, Milan, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Gandolfi C. (2018) – *Matter of Space*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes R. (1957) – “The world of wrestling”. In: Barthes R., *Mythologies*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1957, pp. 5-14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> De Marco M. L. (2015) – *Studio di “Spazio” n.6: Struttura come Forma*, Luigi Moretti. [online] <http://www.arcduccitta.it/2015/12/struttura-come-forma-luigi-moretti-spazio-n-6-studio/> [last access: 20 april 2020].

<sup>14</sup> Gandolfi C. (2018) – *Matter of Space*, op. cit., p. 223.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 236.