

Alessandro Oltremarini  
**Care and measure.**  
**While everyone around makes noise**

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Abstract

The text raises the questions of the role of architecture and the architect's responsibility in the society during the pandemic. It develops around four dialectical couples: normality-emergence; safety-care; global-local; real-virtual. I want to affirm the contrast between the autonomy of architectural research and the dominant contemporary interests which confuse "practical problem with aesthetic problem" (Persico 1935) and cause the alteration of values and information. Furthermore, within it, I intend to identify the concept of care as a methodological paradigm for architectural thought, in which its characteristics (slowness, rituality, plurality) could preserve memory and values of a democratic culture and of what represents it: the city.

Parole Chiave

Care — Measure — Form — Architecture — Value



**Fig. 1**

Yves Klein, *Leap into the void*, 1960.

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The transition from Michel Foucault's disciplinary society to the William Burroughs' one of control, which Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze 1990) highlighted thirty years ago, has today undergone a further transformation: Covid-19 has imposed on society both, discipline and control. First of all I therefore believe that it is necessary to reflect on the sense of the hope for – and on the convenience in – a return to normality: we know that this normality follows a norm and that today it is defined by the constant state of emergency that communities and urban policies have accumulated over the past fifty years, even before the pandemic. Covid-19 is accelerating the process that is already underway, widening the social gap that is engulfing the middle classes and investing the weakest: all of this is also inevitably reflected in the relationship between its spread and the living conditions of the more marginal urban realities, on which the contemporary architect is called to express his position. Surprisingly, while the lockdown has accelerated the enhancement of virtual skills and relationships, almost in contradiction the need for physical distance has imposed attention to the concreteness of the measure that the virtual tends to ignore.

In this scenario, a very specific question takes on a key role: what should architecture represents? Has it to respond, in retrospect, to technical and social needs and contingent necessities, or is it possible to affirm its role as a discipline useful for providing society on the one hand with alternative visions and on the other some cultural grids? This question is part of a well-defined framework: we have learned, in the last half century, that the right way is between building "for" and building "against" something; but in this third way we have unlearned the implications of the two extremes: this my impression is based on a principle of generational experiences. I mean that the

current generation, to which I belong, has not experienced the tragedies and euphorias of the fathers of modernity and democracy, except in the indirect form of the narrative: instead we live – and we are the second or third generation in a row – the failures of those experiences which, as such and having removed the reasons for those failures, they take on the function of a preventive warning that forces some people on the average path of the minimum risk and attracts other one on the nostalgic path of myth. The first, the most mediocre way of nihilism, the other, the way of the most exalted surrogate. Both attitudes trace the lines already traced on a precise ground that corresponds to an equally precise interpretation of history. This partial and usually inherited interpretation is taken as certainty and feeds the desire for a specific requirement: the security. In the city, this desire replaces interest for its definition with interest for its control. It also reduces control to supervision, eliminating its potential as a conceptual tool for the project and for the comparison between phenomena. A dominant condition derives from this: it corresponds to the identification of the control of the city with the attempt to submit its parts and their relations to the instrument of an intelligent grid and mathematical rules. This identification between purpose and instrument, considered too often necessary and even sufficient, not only brings with it the reverberation of a functionalism that in history has proved sterile, but risks producing a generational and cultural amnesia, and consequently an inability in being able to preserve, reconstruct and transmit a collective thought and knowledge, a human heritage that includes the sense of architecture and the city. In this sense, Giorgio Agamben's plea (Agamben 2020), during the quarantine proves to be exemplary: in an attempt to avoid an alleged risk, we risk erasing and forgetting in indifference the rituals and human behaviors that constitute the foundation of the civil values that we have over time conquered.

The images of silent, immobile and metaphysical cities, even the images of the pope in a deserted St. Peter's Square, have laid bare the substance of the cities: they have shown that the monuments and symbols of a community are the only facts that can preserve its history, its places, its identity but, above all, that they can represent the values in which it recognizes itself (or which it does not recognize). The expressive and poetic power of those images (much denser than many films and TV series) in my opinion represents the claim of the specific and the general, according to the meaning given by Deleuze (Deleuze 1968), as an alternative to the generic city that Rem Koolhaas had prophesied and that his "Countryside, The future" exhibition – inaugurated in February and still on display at the Guggenheim Museum in New York – confirms.

This observation strengthens my conviction: the sense of the city corresponds to its formal contents that constitute the substance of urban spaces; furthermore, the change, rectification and actualization of the city and its semantic values are based on knowledge, which «includes what is not yet known» (Monestiroli 2014), and these values – and contents – are formed between the anthropomorphic interpretation of history and a sort of "revelation" which usually has an individual origin (Giedion 1956). So, if it is true that both are, by their nature, unpredictable and uncertain variables, it would be wrong to say that the technical use of algorithmic models corresponds to a conflicting and contradictory action with respect to the task to which the architect is called and who resides in the «reference to the human and everyday substance of living» (Purini 1985)? Isn't it fair to say that in this call, in the human and in the everyday, the principle of care is manifested

and that it is contradictory to the one of security even etymologically? In fact, if the first evokes strength and certainty, the second expresses kindness and unpredictability: immediacy versus slowness, gestures versus rituality, univocity versus plurality.

Here I want to mean the care as a labile condition, in the sense of provisionality and therefore authentically in reality, attentive to the plural relationships between different parts and their continuous change of meaning. The care recognizes the character of necessity that belongs to the measure, both of “things” and of the relationships between them. At the same time, it allows the coexistence of specific and general choices, of rules and exceptions, according to an inferential process of an abductive type, uncertain and therefore always open, which implements the ideological deductive and inductive ones, of the two ways. Furthermore, this condition accepts the inversion of the relationship that had consolidated on the global territory: cities, metropolises become, for those who have the possibility, centrifugal hubs towards more reserved places, usually small villages, which have the characteristic of being outside the global connection network on which the virus is moving; while in the ordinary the danger branches out, the extraordinary becomes the refuge.

I think that operationally this call to care and measure can only be accepted if we look at the authentic value of their meaning. There is no care that is not calm, that is not attentive and methodical, reflective, rational, measured. There is no measure that is not double, at the same time transitive (to *measure*) and pronominal (to *measure oneself*): it imposes on the one hand a measure in the sense of proportion and thus reveals the meaning of the design action, or of an intelligible system concerning the relationship between the parts, between the forms; on the other hand it determines a clear confrontation with reality, of critical exploration of the unknowable, aimed at knowledge and even its contradiction.

We can, we have to ask ourselves how all this is reflected in the architectural project, if the standards will undergo a slight updating or if we will be able to overcome their quantitative conception even in practice. And again, we ask ourselves about the settlement and housing responses that are more coherent and responsive to current needs. These questions fall within the problematic relationship between current interests and the possibility of affirming the autonomy of research. Not only because it, slow by its nature, can't compete in speed with the former, but above all because it is believed that these are responsible for altered values, transfigured information and the determination of what Siegfried Giedion called «dominant taste» (Giedion 1956). It is therefore necessary to be careful not to confuse «practical problem with aesthetic problem» (Persico 1935). The emergency may prove to be an opportunity to highlight the inconsistency of the myth, which has consolidated in recent years and which has a disjunctive as well as dogmatic character, in favor of treatment as a new *logos*: its inclusive and democratic nature allows differences to take on a dialectical and compensatory dimension that scientific knowledge should convey in the new methodological paradigms and in the constituent parts of the city.

To do this it is necessary to clearly distinguish the problems that Persico has highlighted; at the same time it is necessary to be immersed in reality and to be extraneous to chaotic speed, hysterical screams and the ordinary homologation of the contemporary. I turn my thoughts to Vittorio Gregotti: «My most important advice is: when you make architecture, make as little noise as possible. This is achieved with attention and patience, without ever

forgetting that architecture is a job. Main rule for those who start planning, keep quiet around, to be more careful, and able to see small: among things» (Gregotti 1985).

### **Bibliography**

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Alessandro Oltremarini (Gallipoli, 1984), architect, graduated from the Faculty of Architecture Sapienza University of Rome with Dina Nencini. With her he carries out teaching and research activities. He is a PhD in Architecture and Construction at Sapienza University of Rome earning his title in 2017 with a thesis entitled *La modificazione. Riflessioni sul linguaggio in architettura*.