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The wonder of shape
Twenty-one questions to Renato Rizzi

Edit by: *Claudia Sansò*
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The small and dense booklet that is the subject of this review is part of series of interviews *Know to believe in architecture*, published by the Neapolitan publishing company CLEAN and composed – as you can read in the introduction – as a “research series edited by students and young architects, questioning protagonists of contemporary architecture on reasons and future of the discipline”.

Among *Twenty-one questions to Renato Rizzi*, edited by Claudia Sansò, perhaps the last two are those most of all solicit architect’s reflections. Sansò, referring to another text published by Rizzi himself¹, tries to capture the main referent of architect’s thought, identifying it not so much as a physical person, as in a general posture that observes and judges the world: that of the “contemporary” man.

It is Rizzi who indirectly makes clear (the term “contemporary” is rarely used during the dialogue) this common position of his masters, describing them as «[...] characters who have always been on edges of culture of their time»².

“Exiled”, “condemned”, “invisible” are not only terms with which Rizzi describes social status of his referents, but also inevitable estrangement that denotes “contemporaries”, in the sense that Agamben offers when he writes that «he truly belongs to his time, he truly is contemporary, who does not coincide perfectly with it nor adapts to its demands, and is therefore, in this sense, outdated; but, because of this gap and anachronism, he is able to perceiving and capture his time more than others»³.

It is from this “responsibility” towards his own era, which is also an «awareness towards discipline of Architecture»⁴, that Rizzi sets out to reflect on culture of our time, dominated, according to him, by technical-scientific knowledge. The critical interpretation of reality provided by Rizzi is carried out in a tight-knit dialectic between opposites, in which the sphere of “dominable”, constituted by *τέχνη* (techne), is contrasted with the sphere of “indomitable” of *ἀρχή* (archè). While the first breaks connections between things – analysis is precisely the operation that gives free relations – the latter reveals unity of facts, «everything is related, everything is strictly bound»⁵.

Rizzi, preferring soul «which is in common with everyone»⁶ (archè) to body «which is separate, disjointed»⁷ (techne), is interested in deeper me-

aning of things.

Perhaps it is because of this that the interview, thanks to the interviewer's awareness, focuses on language. Both Sansò's questions and Rizzi's answers start with clarification of etymology, almost all of Greek origin – *θεάομαι* (theàomai) = theory; *περί φέρειν* (perì pherèin) = periphery; *αἰδώς* (aidòs) = modesty; *δίκη* (dike) = justice. Not only this expedient gives the dialogue a certain harmony and continuity, but above all it allows Rizzi to stay in his favorite "field", that of search for meaning of things and connections that hold them together.

The reference to "links" is interesting because it highlights the relationship between the dualistic nature of Rizzi's theses, called for Sansò's questions, and philosophical thought of Jacques Derrida, another possible referent of architect's thought.

In fact, the architect's dualistic thought seems in a certain way to take up concepts summarized by the French philosopher in the neologism *différance*, used to indicate differential relationship that involving a "given" and its "relationship" with other, with is different from itself. According to Derrida, the oppositional determinations (nature/culture; history/technology; sensible/ideal; sign/meaning etc.) «[...] are not simply specular, but hierarchically organized: one term always prevails over the other»⁸.

If our time is characterized by the prevalence of τέχνη, it is the architect's duty not to passively accept current condition, but to pose the problem of overturning the status quo.

This declaration of intent on the role of architect in our society should not come as a surprise, if we consider that Architect (with capital A) is for Rizzi one who constantly questions the depth of beruf, another important term – this time with German roots – to be translated not only as "profession", but significantly also as "vocation", «[...] something that does not depend on a choice but that one already possesses»⁹.

The vocation of the architect is explicit in his cultural approach to architecture, which has nothing to do with arrogance and personal ostentation, but rather presupposes that he steps aside to bring out the inherent value of architecture. Another dualism in which the contrast emerges between the so-called "nominatives" (a synonym could be "archistars") and the "datives", «those who receive», those who step back so that totality of cultures has the right space to emerge. This is a cultural approach that could be related to Maurice Blanchot's thought, as Rizzi himself suggests: «all works exist before our ideas, and we have only the task of passing them on to their evidence»¹⁰.

Not only dualisms, but also significant triads compose the excursus of this engaging dialogue, such as the one that makes explicit the relationship between "wisdom", "culture" and "civilization". Wisdom is understood by Rizzi as a repertoire of technical-scientific knowledge, which is by nature a-directed. This direction must be dictated by the culture of the time, that owns awareness of its configurations. It is up to civilization to transform these conscious directions into concrete, real forms.

The culture in which Rizzi moves is western culture, the great European culture that represents the peak of thought. Rizzi's projects are rooted in the tradition of western culture.

It is no coincidence that the term "tradition", together with "nature" and "technique", set out another decisive triad for understanding theoretical substratum of his architecture. If, in fact, the project makes it possible to relate «the needs of a community with the ideals developed by history»¹¹,

it is not in the invention that the architect's work is to be found. It is not through invention that this relationship is manifested, but through imitation which, free from any authorship, allows form to emerge as the foundation of tradition. Imitation is obviously not to be understood as a pure copy, but as the «transposition of a language that changes its forms while preserving their fascination»¹².

The project's link with "tradition" is combined with that with "nature", understood as concrete roots in the forms of the earth. Rizzi explains the prevalence of chthonic architecture in his work as the symbolic desire to sink of all into one's own interiority and then, in the footsteps of our culture (and what else but Dante's work can best symbolise it), climb the ascending path from Hell to Paradise.

Rizzi concretely follows this path in the interview, associating his undergrounds projects with Hell, the *Elizabethan Theatre* with Purgatory, and the *Cosmos of the bildung* revolving around the lantern of S. Maria del Fiore with Paradise.

Finally, "technique", to be understood as perfection of constructive act, ideally concludes design process. However, Rizzi warns us once again that the true definition of a project is the one that allows it to rise to the rank of "opera", but this only happens if the project itself, in its genesis, does not renounce its own singularity, which resides above all in the "wonder of form", that involuntary feeling that must be "the essential of Architecture".

Notes

¹Rizzi R. (2019) – *Eppure... | And yet...* Divisare Books, Roma. The text is a collection of short essays on the thought and works of 10 masters chosen by Rizzi: Emanuele Severino, Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk, Carlo Enzo, Iosif Brodskij, Derek Walcott, Osip Mandel'stam, Aldo Rossi, René Daumal e Victor Hugo.

² Sansò C. (ed.) (2020) – *Ventuno domande a Renato Rizzi*, CLEAN, Napoli, p.59.

³ Agamben G. (2008) – *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?*. Nottetempo, Milano, pp.8-9.

⁴ Sansò C. (ed.) (2020) – op. cit., p.7.

⁵ Ivi, p.15.

⁶ Ivi, p.39.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Vitale F. (2018) – "L'ultima fortezza della metafisica. Dieci anni dopo". In: Id. (ed.), Jacques Derrida – *Le arti dello spazio. Scritti e interventi sull'architettura*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine, p.17. It seems no coincidence that the book series, Aesthetics and Architecture, is directed by Renato Rizzi, who collaborated with Peter Eisenman between the 1980s and 1990s, the very years in which Eisenman, in turn, was an interlocutor with Jacques Derrida, through projects, conferences and lectures on the relationship between architecture and philosophy.

⁹ Sansò C. (ed.) (2020) – op. cit., p.7.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 17.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 35

¹² Ibidem.