# Raffaella Neri The precision of an idea

## Abstract

This essay describes the relationship between drawing and design in the work of Antonio Monestiroli. Precision and essentiality are the hallmarks of his works of architecture, which also governed his ways of drawing, a design tool focused on technical representations, at an urban scale and that of the individual building. Plans, elevations, cross sections, volumetric plan views, collages and scale models were the prevailing ways in which his projects were explored and illustrated, even during the transition from analogue to digital drawing.

Keywords Antonio Monestiroli — Drawing — Project — Precision — Essentiality

A long time ago now, there existed a British architecture magazine called *9H*, a name which today would mean nothing to a young architect. Its name was a reference to the hardness of a pencil lead, a fairly dry one, which it was possible to hone to a very sharp point to draw a thin, merciless line, almost an incision in the paper, which left no room for flaws, imprecisions or ambiguity in the stroke.

In the office, such a pencil was almost never used for drawing, in fact it was virtually impossible to find one, but 9H was the metaphor for a precision which Antonio Monestiroli also aspired to in his drawings, as in his works of architecture. A precision which was always a characteristic of his work, and which, as is generally the case, his way of drawing faithfully reflected. Because drawing reflects the thinking behind a design, testifies to its genesis and development, parallels its advancement and variations: it gives shape to an idea, and tends to be more precise the more precise the idea itself is.

For Antonio Monestiroli, precision meant an aspiration to clarity and intelligibility, both indispensable requirements of his architecture. The sketch too obeyed this same rule: something which he practised and loved little, especially in its most impressionistic guise, and consequently he rarely exhibited, since it always comprised something vague and superfluous which detracted attention away from his goal. When it did exist, it was just a note, a note which generally included measurements and proportions because, once drawn, the idea took shape, and the measurements and proportion constituted its vital essence. Occasionally, a sketch was made on the basis of a more precise drawing, a plan, an indication which outlined the condition at the edge of the new work of architecture, establishing its relationships, centres, and hierarchies. Or it might schematically contrast





Figg. 1 a-b Project for Porta Genova, Milan 1987. Axonometry views.

various hypotheses, possible ways of composing and aggregating several buildings, principles on the basis of which to bring form and meaning to locations and settlements.

In the era of drawings in Indian ink, the dry stroke of a pencil corresponded to a 0.1mm nib, the finest on the market, which broke easily but guaranteed lines and angles of great precision, the same ones subsequently assured, and indeed intensified, by drawings done on a computer. With this versatile tool there is a way of being more precise even in three-dimensional views: the computer makes it easier to control and represent the space between individual works of architecture, their proportions, sometimes also the light, and it is to this end that it has been used, with the same rigour and a little astuteness. Monestiroli eschewed any gratification for drawing as such: it is the rigour of the architecture and the search for generality in a design which are reflected in the essentiality and assertiveness of his drawing. Like his works of architecture, this must never be appealing or charming, seeking applause or aiming to please; it was not consolatory, as Vittorini remarked, nor must it be deceptive, but instead ethically lean and severe. It must be merciless and, to be useful, spotlight any problems and mistakes. Because the architectural drawing has a purely instrumental value, and a 'beautiful drawing' is one which best translates the thinking, effectively and clearly representing the idea of the particular work of architecture and the way in which this is to be translated into an actual construction.

Antonio Monestiroli's predilection was quite evidently geared to the technical drawing, site plan, ground plan, front and section: a scientific drawing, rigorous, plainly abstract, but appropriate to the project. With shadows, if possible, which better explained the depth of space even on a sheet of paper. Hence the caution for the use of perspective drawing and an aversion to 'renderings', to a drawing devoid of control or measurements, totally falsifiable, the opposite of the spatial cohesion and precision he pursued. Instead, the three-dimensional model to scale was an appropriate tool for measuring space, it too an objective, precise, summary, yet abstract representation, but closer to reality and the three-dimensionality of actual places and buildings. It was all a question of purpose: a three-dimensional



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# Figg. 2 a-b

In the previous page: (Above), Chiesa al quartiere Gallaratese, Milan 1989. Prospects, sections, plans.

## Figg. 3 a-b

Project for the Accademia bridge in Venice, 1985. Model, axonometry view.



representation, and drawing in general, were tools to represent and measure an imagined space, to approach its actual construction. The control over the spatial qualities which compositions generate, and the definition of the relationships between volumes are at the heart of an architectural project, the part that is more difficult to imagine and predict. And also to teach: these are aspects refined with experience, and the difficulty increases as the scale grows, the measurement of space eluding the proximity of the body and the perception of the eye. It is no coincidence that the *representation* of space has always been an important issue to do with *thinking* about space. As the history of perspective teaches us.

The drawings of projects involving urban compositions are particularly elementary, almost schematic. They are, once again, the affirmation of a thought which systematically aims to establish first and foremost, a *principle*: this principle concerns places and spaces which the composition of volumes then generates, and which must then enjoy a coherent expression through the form of the works of architecture. In these drawings, the pieces of architecture can only be reduced to their elementary form, geometrically abstracted, a composition of rectangles, squares, circles, and lines, lacking their architectural definition, which will come later, consistent with and guided by them. Because these geometries already contain a typological





**Figg. 4 a-b** Project for the new Politecnico alla Bovisa, Milan 1990. Collage, model.

and spatial relationship idea: not merely a question of distributing quantities and functions, nor playing with shapes. Each figure refers to a type, suggests a way of setting itself in space and already contains the relationships between the solids and voids; hierarchies, places, and measurement of the open spaces, that is, everything fundamental to the project, are defined at this moment, through these drawings.

They are minimal drawings, barely gratifying, of an almost uplifting simplicity, equal only to their importance. Drawings which students underestimate and tend to avoid at school because they do not capture value, but which Monestiroli was never afraid to show. Drawings which he knew to be generating and decisive, precisely because of their extreme essentiality, that same essentiality which the depth of a thought possesses, which assimilates formal reduction to intellectual reduction. This is his difficult lesson: one must not be afraid of the elementarity of a drawing, where all the smallest elements are loaded with meaning; because, if it is the expression of a thought, it is in reality a tough accomplishment. Instead, we must fear the gratuitousness of the form and its poverty of sense, which reflect only the banality of the ideas. Come what may, reduction and abstraction are proper to a drawing at any scale: it is a matter of finding the limit that suits each of them.

And one last point: *collage*. Like some great masters, Antonio Monestiroli often made use of it and even wrote about it in a short essay entitled «I Segni della Colla»<sup>1</sup> [«Signs of Glue»]. Initially comprised of photocopies, scissors, and glue, in reality, it sometimes replaced site plans and views in urban scale projects to better simulate an imaginary reality, without giving the game away. But, above all, it was used in the initial hypotheses for large-scale compositions as a design tool.

The use of collage corresponds to an idea of architecture based on analogue thinking: it maintains, on the one hand, continuity with history, the possibility of designing new works of architecture starting from existing ones, and on the other manifesting, through its evidently provisional nature, its being out of place, the necessity for a renewal, to adapt the works to definite times and places. Collage gives no indication on the form of the new works of architecture, but advances, even more than drawn volumetric plan views, the precision of a typological and spatial idea, already







## Figg. 5 a-b

Project for a sports hall, Limbiate 1998. Perspective view, plan, model. concretized in a completed form in an earlier period. It therefore suggests relationships between the pieces of architecture and open spaces, measurements, proportions, ratios of voids and solids, opening, closing, directions, isolation, aggregation, all general indications contained by building types. Choosing a work of architecture to compose a collage means recognizing and re-proposing a general idea, presupposes a capacity of abstraction in the thought and reading of buildings and places on the basis of an intentionality of design, in anticipation of a new interpretation which brings constructional and formal concreteness to the renewed architecture. An operation proper to our modernity and, precisely because of this, strongly dependent on analogue thought.

Two more words on the use of colour. In Monestiroli's drawings, the colours are few and far between, and are recurring, as are the elements of the architecture, reduced to the minimum, to a generality. The red of bricks, the



ochre of stone, or perhaps a collage for the latter, the green of the elements of nature, and few others. They are colours which aim to be realistic, appropriate, but also, at the same time, abstract, almost free of their own expression. Once again, they are indicative of the generic nature of the materials: the "greenery" can only be green, conceivably changing intensity depending on whether it is a meadow or a forest, the water can only be blue (even if that of Venice tends to green). This blue is a uniform colour, little more than symbolic, a reference to the generic idea of water. It can be compared to the "fixed scene" of a theatre: the representation is not that particular water, variable, in that particular light, as in an Impressionist painting, but water in general. It is the opposite concept to a rendering, to contextualization, to a form of counterfeit verism of representation. This use of the colours tends to a generality which is difficult to misinterpret, which the particularity and variations of reality will then make rich and alive.

This, in general, I believe, was for Antonio Monestiroli the fundamental and stealthy role of drawing. Together with the works of architecture it must be, above all, stacked against formalism, in order to assert itself as a rigorous and strict interpreter of the *need for form*, of that formal precision which aspires to correspond precisely to the idea, and to manifest it in the clearest and most direct way possible.





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Planetario di Cosenza, 2001.

Figg. 6 a-b

