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From Canada through Italy towards a Critical Phenomenology Dal Canada per l'Italia, verso una nuova fenomenologia critica

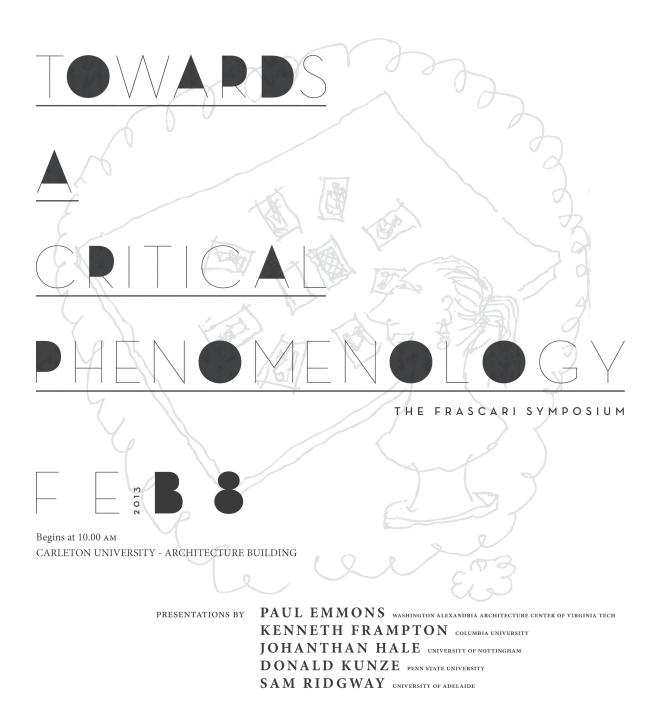
This article intends to contextualize and resume the international conference "Towards a critical phenomenology" that took place on February the 8th 2013 at the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). This text aims to outline the actual situation of the debate on theory of architecture and it quotes the most important essays through which phenomenology has given a fundamental contribution to architecture. It also points out the main issues the technological progress causes in relation to the process of design and in relation to the personality of the architect itself. In the matter of these issues, this article wants to sketch a brief profile of Marco Frascari, director of the Azrieli School since 2004 to 2012, whose work, everywhere well-known, is almost unknown in Italy where he born and studied.

Questo articolo intende contestualizzare e riassumere la conferenza internazionale "Verso una Fenomenologia Critica" che si è svolta l'8 Febbraio 2013 presso l'Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism della Carleton University di Ottawa (Canada). Esso si propone di tratteggiare la situazione attuale degli studi sulla teoria della composizione architettonica e cita i contributi fondamentali della scuola fenomenologica al dibattito in architettura, sottolineando le principali questioni che l'attuale progresso scientifico pone in relazione al processo di concezione di un'architettura e alla stessa figura dell'autore. A riguardo di questi interrogativi, il testo intende proporre un breve profilo di Marco Frascari, direttore dell'Azrieli School dal 2004 al 2012, il cui lavoro, ovunque assai noto, è pressoché sconosciuto in Italia ove pure Marco Frascari è nato ed ha compiuto i suoi studi.

Keywords: phenomenology; theory of architecture; drawing and representation; personality of the architect; Marco Frascari

Parole chiave: fenomenologia; teoria dell'architettura; disegno e rappresentazione; la figura dell'architetto; Marco Frascari





Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism



The sharp conflicts between Dangland's precise 'why?' and the commissar's nonchalant 'I don't know' punctuated the squad's investigation. None of the others tried to understand the role of this bitter struggle between accuracy and vagueness, but they all favoured one side or another. The Positivists thought that Adamsberg dragged out investigation, taking

them willfully into the fog, leaving his colleagues trailing behind him without instructions or road maps.

The others, the cloud shovellers – thus named after a traumatic visit by the squad to Quebec thought that the commissar's results quite justified the vagaries of the investigations, even if the essentials of his work methods escaped them. According to mood, or to the circumstances of the moment, which might inspire either jumpiness or relaxation, someone could be a positivist one day and a cloud shoveller the next or vice versa. Only Adamsberg and Dangland, the two principle antagonists, never varied their position.

Fred Vargas, The Night's Foul Work, Vintage 2009

WHAT HAS PHENOMENOLOGY TO OFFER ARCHITECTS TODAY?

It is quite possible that the use and abuse of language, philosophy and architecture has not only led to a number of theory-speak volumes and dictionaries but a pretence that has clouded the very discipline and practice of architecture itself. Can we put that another way? Consistent attempts to use language to claim more than architecture can achieve, have led to innumerable triumphs, innumerable disasters. From the tragically hip to the tragically uncool, phenomenology in architecture has struggled to maintain the critical significance it attained in architecture from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Did it indeed collide with Post-Modernism as recent new scholarship maintains? Does this indicate a historical takeover for a (critical) minority of theoreticians, academics and practitioners, or is this critical hindsight useful for scholars but – as usual - not practitioners? Do practitioners still find the concept of the phenomenological 'spooky' but useful, if the language and codes can be used to support intuition and the invisible? Yet we still must ask this question: how much is the poetic act - the invisible and unknown, that moment just a little beyond our reach and comprehension - still considered essential to a resistant process in architecture?

In the context of at a school of architecture (Carleton) which saw Alberto Perez Gomez as director in the 1980s and Marco Frascari more recently, it seems fitting to re-visit and re-assess the initial seduction of phenomenology as it seeped into architecture from its various philosophical residues. It is relevant, here in Carleton, to acknowledge Marco Frascari as a thinker and architect who himself has offered a parallel reading that to some extent aligns with the Phenomenological project yet suggestively attempts to re-awaken and explore a lost imagination in architecture. The first Frascari Symposium will take on this exercise and respond to this legacy in a critical manner by inviting some of those who have studied under and worked with Frascari over the span of his teaching career. Hale, Emmons, Ridgway and Kunze in a series of presentations with respondents will place us both within this legacy of Phenomenology, whilst signaling the singular significance of Frascari's work and offering some pointers for the future. To close the first Frascari Symposium, in a public lecture in the National Gallery of Canada, Kenneth Frampton will respond in a way to this thinking whilst posing another challenge in a lecture called *What role is there for the Architect in a Destitute Time*?

In a bridge to the second Frascari Symposium (Winter 2014) Frampton will, amongst other aspects, set out a challenge to the future architects in the 21st century by re-positioning the architect in the current moment, echoing and re-assessing the work of Heidegger and Arendt.

[This text by Roger Connah is derived from the leaflet of the Symposium]





Carleton

A 🗨 🖿 Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism



The role of Phenomenology in architectural design has been fundamental for the interpretation of architectural studies beginning with the work of Christian Norberg-Schulz "Intentions in Architecture" (1963, translated in Italian in 1967), followed by "Architecture: presence, language, place", Skira, Milano, 2000 and finally Juhani Pallasma's "The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses" (2005).

The objectivity of the Husserlian point of view carefully describes phenomenon as each one occurs in the proper way it occurs, which is particularly favorable to architecture during a phase of critical judgment for its final manifestation, and in relation to complex – inner and outer - processes of its generation. There is therefore an inner phenomenology; the one of culture, intentions and sentiments. An outer phenomenology of perception and a phenomenology of production which are continuously intertwined to each other in the process we shall refer to as "architectural composition". This process can be considered indeed the most difficult to teach, especially if the architect is conceived as a contemporary artist whose main character is thought to be guided by a sort of frenzy or inebriation which throws out any possible rational reasoning or the power of demonstration.

Regarding this issue, it is therefore appropriate to highlight the conference recently held at the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada) entitled "Towards a Critical phenomenology". As a subtitle and parallel theme, the conference lectures also questioned "What can phenomenology offer architects today?", a pressing question considering the cultural climate of our time. In fact, from the 60s to the 80s the contribution of phenomenology played a primary and recognized role in the education of architects specifically in studies on perception. At the end of the brief century, that is the twentieth, the role of phenomenology has been quickly shelved, both as way of theoretical speculation, and as source of inspiration.

These issues are the ones also Roger Connah highlighted in his presentation of this first Frascari Symposium:

"It is quite possible that the use and abuse of language, philosophy and architecture has not only led to a number of theory-speak volumes and dictionaries but a pretence that has clouded the very discipline and practice of architecture itself. Can we put that another way? Consistent attempts to use language to claim more than architecture can achieve, have led to innumerable triumphs, innumerable disasters. From the tragically hip to the tragically uncool, phenomenology in architecture has struggled to maintain the critical significance it attained in architecture from the 1960s to the 1980s. Did it indeed collide with Post-Modernism as recent new scholarship maintains? Does this indicate a historical takeover for a (critical) minority of theoreticians, academics and practitioners, or is this critical hindsight useful for scholars but – as usual - not practitioners? Do practitioners still find the concept of the phenomenological 'spooky' but useful, if the language and codes can be used to support intuition and the invisible? Yet we still must ask this question: how much is the poetic act – the invisible and unknown, that moment just a little beyond our reach and comprehension – still considered essential to a resistant process in architecture?"

Contemporary architectures realized by current famous star-system architects Empireum, in most cases, contributes only to the success of emphatic and self-celebratory gestures, which typically stratifying architectural object and verbal pretended meanings. The major shortcoming is, for the most part, the distance and independence between meaningful spaces and their verbal interpretations. Similar to other forms of art, architecture has been lent itself to the triumph of the spoken word and affabulation, well beyond the interpretation of the extended forms of its own manifestation.

Furthermore, the changing conditions of production and conception of the architectural object itself also collaborate to the crisis of a 'phenomenological' approach. With the contemporary technological revolution, the process that takes place in drawing through the cyclical and interactive relationship between subject and object becomes more and more a refinement of algorithms capable of designing persuasive and habitable formal results. In many cases this is manifested in the design of architecture because it can be reproduced through complex algorithms and highly specialized machines able to produce it. This fact has of course a very powerful and shattering effect on traditional mechanisms of design and architectural drawing, which unhinge the usual relationship of "incarnation" between man and architecture, once inherent in drawings as iterative and demonstrative acts.

Far from preconceptions, or nostalgic trends, technological advancement has to be deeply investigated in its consequences on the intimate and immediate relationship between subject and



object which it intervenes in stopping or slowing down in the opacity of electronic circuits which, compared to the pencil, offer new horizons of possibilities at the cost of an incremental complexity.

In the academic debate which also involves the teaching of what in Italy is still called "architectural composition", such radical changes in production processes generate a secondary debate and contribute to model and re-define the role of the author, that is the personality of the architect. Similarly, Gideon in "Space, Time and Architecture" (1941) stated that the ideal man of the XIX century was the one who was able to do all in the field of industry (the type watchmaker - steelworker - engineer played by Bogardus, James Watt or Brummels¹). We could perhaps say that today the contemporary ideal man is the one who will manage to dominate all the means of modern technology, (i.e. softwares and their implementation) and their systemic global interactive network (i.e. internet) that spans space, time and architecture beyond the physical universe, in new possibilities of actions and interactions by which, in fact, the virtual is experienced.

The distortion in the relations between body of the author and corporeality of the artifact, are necessary to introduce to the Conference held at the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism at Carleton University and are perhaps the best justification for it. In its formation and history, the school of Architecture has had several influential personalities; such as Alberto Perez-Gomez which acted as director from 1983-1986. Most recently, Marco Frascari, architect and architectural theorist, who is unluckily almost forgotten in Italian architectural discourse², began a term as director in 2004.

Frascari, born in Italy and educated at the University of Venice, is well recognized internationally as a contemporary leader and visionary of architectural theory and criticism. At the informal opening speech of the Conference, in Frascary library, Roger Connah, director of the Graduate Program at the school of Architecture, highlighted the life and work of Frascari as follows: "Marco Frascari came to Carleton in 2004. He is an Italian architect and architectural theorist born in Mantova, in 1945. He studied with Carlo Scarpa at the Venice School, and later received his PhD in Architecture from the University of Pennsylvania where he then taught for several years. Visiting Professor at Columbia and Harvard, then Professor of Architecture at Virginia Tech. University, Frascari has guided many students and scholars, and has written innumerable architectural essays that speak of, and to, a lost language of sensual architecture. This is an architecture based on the body, physical memories and symbology. It returns us to alchemy but offers a demonstrative logic. It explores the nature of representation, material thinking and – yes - material magic. Perhaps, and I say this cautiously, perhaps this is a phenomenology-inspired thinking too. But only at this stage 'perhaps'. Frascari writes and thinks, if I can recall the words of Samuel Beckett in 1931 from an essay called Dante, Bruno, Vico, Joyce³, like a carefully folded ham sandwich....A tramezzino!"

This introduction was certainly unconventional within academia, yet light without being frivolous and disclosed a precise concept of architecture and, above all, a clear vision of the architect. In the matter of the parallel with food, this is not at all new, and on the contrary it recalls an old trope. In effect the same Frascari published in 1986, in the "Journal of Architectural Education" an essay titled "Semiotics ab Edendo" Taste in architecture⁴, in which he recalled the linguistic proximity between "to know" (sapere) and "flavor" (sapore) already explored in the ancient time and during the patristic age. Frascari quoted a wrong etymology by lsidore of Seville who wanted the latin term aedes (building, place for living) derived from the verb edo which means "to eat" (whose gerund is indeed edendo) and the house was called in that way because if it was in the past, first of all the place in which they shared the meal. A false etymology and s the understanding of the acts of signification involved in the architectural construing"⁵.

The article goes on to compare Francis Militia and Marie-Antoine Careme in a continuous fluctuation between architecture and cuisine, gastronomy and architecture. The final proof and confirmation of this deep intersection in human experience is attested by the specular claims of Antheleme Jean Brillat-Savarin and August Perret, the first saying "On devient Cusinier, mais on nait rotisseeur"⁶, and the second affirming "On devient ingenieur, mais on nait architecte"⁷. A parallelism "which singles out the conjectural nature of architecture and gastronomy"⁸ proves a semantic proximity already stated in the classical age which could be considered simply funny, or peripheral in human experience with regards to the concept of wisdom and knowledge dominating today. Despite every etymological overlap, the comparison between eating and dwelling is possible because they both are primary and primitive panic acts, respect to which man is completely and entirely compromised. The result is a concept and an auspice for a man figure and architect "a tutto tondo", or "copula mundi" as Marsilio Ficino wrote, which deeply roots Marco Frascari within the best part of Italian culture (though he is compelled to write in English).



Frascari presents architecture as a field of synthesis of the human, a field of total embodiment, well displayed in the icon that he brings back in the first chapter of his book "Monsters of Architecture"⁹. In the introduction Frascari makes reference to Vincenzo Scamozzi's treatise in which Architecture is personified into a beautiful women "enthroned among the arts - three on her right and four on her left - and the title Domi [na] Artium is carved on the Predella"¹⁰.

Architecture among the Arts, in the central position in which Herrad von Landsberg represented instead Philososhy¹¹, remains a female Demiurg composing things, or like a cook proposing new flavours, and reveals in Frascari an idea of architecture grown as universal act from the point of view of composition. Frascari's research and teaching experiences can be considered to have a phenomenological approach because of his deep interest in the physiology of the creative process in architecture (which evolve through the act of drawing) and because of the responsibility required to educate an architect "as an intellectual practicing architect rather than a practitioner posing as an intellectual order to compete in the marketplace"¹². Hence also the relevance of Marco Frascari's work.

Since the only way to have complete freedom within the creative process is to manage its development, the search of Frascari on the role of demonstration and representation in architecture in architecture seems to be the key in unlocking a real conscious phenomena. On this theme, the Frascari Symposium saw the participation of outstanding speakers.

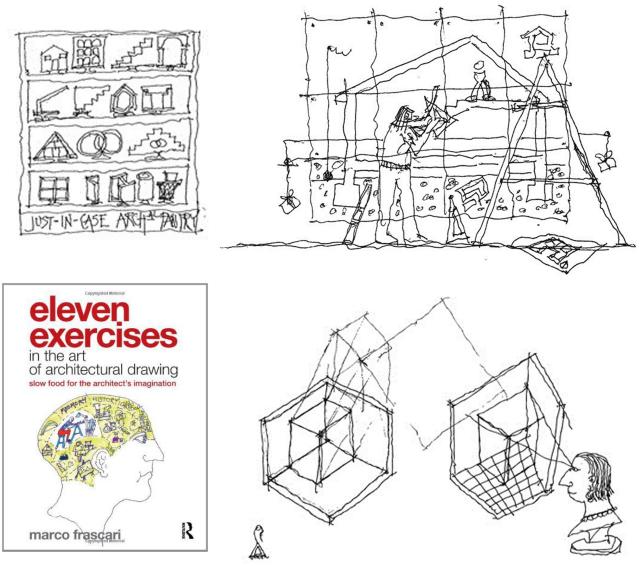
The conference was opened by Jonathan Hale, Associate Professor & Reader in Architectural Theory at the University of Nottingham (England) and Coordinator of the Architectural Humanities research Group. He began with an introduction to "what we might describe as the three phases of phenomenology-inspired architectural thinking"¹³. He also addressed in more recent developments in neuro-science and cognitive tectonics, the need to return and re-read to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (on which Hale is writing an essay within the Routlege's series "Thinkers for architects"). Secondly, his speech touched the notion of drawing and its relation to architecture, to phenomenology and to the teasing out of an imagination that may or may not have architectural implications.

The importance of drawing and representation was also at the center of Paul Emmons' lecture. Emmons, Associate professor at the Washington Alexandria Architecture Center of Virginia Tech (USA), thoroughly explored the historical evolution of representation, a topic on which he is an eminent scholar with many published essays including "the Cultural Role of Architecture"¹⁴. He is a colleague Frascari and directs the PhD program in Architecture and Design that Frascari Founded. His contribution addressed material phenomenology within drawing.

His contribution addressed material phenomenology within drawing. Dr Sam Ridgway, a senior Lecturer at the School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban design at the University of Adelaide (Australia), currently finishing a book on the works of Frascari, shared his research connecting drawing and realized buildings through a demonstrative process by means of small and not so small real cases, as a way to reveal the imaginative praxis and thinking involved. Small or big, internal or external, Frascari's work have been illustrated like demonstrations, by means of which all the auditory has been plunged back into architecture to understand architecture itself.

At the final lecture, an introduction speech for Kenneth Frampton by Roger Connah, referred to Frampton as "Mister F" (a nickname he seemed to truly appreciate). Donald Kunze, who taught architecture theory and general arts criticism at Penn State University since 1984, intervened with hyperbolic irony on uses and abuses of phenomelogy by architects and artists. Beginning at the generation of logic and symbolic shot circuits, the generation which was born from the misunderstanding of meaning and etymologies as it happened for aedes and edens, and also it could happen with the word Tramezzino which could sound like "in-between", with the addition of the diminutive suffix "-ino". "So a tramezzino is a carefully folded ham sandwich, when ham is used as the filler in between earth and sky"¹⁵...True or false? "To conclude unnecessarily, Phenomenology (we may speak of other movements too) has

"To conclude unnecessarily, Phenomenology (we may speak of other movements too) has become the fear of fear; it is imagined fear of the route to ignored poetry. And it is also, because of this imagined state, a fear that can be uttered by architects, professors, historians and instructors alike who clearly have no real interest in and need no real understanding of it as a movement in philosophy, but may actually be thinking it out naturally, ignoring it slyly, whilst acting it out architecturally...."¹⁶. We shall see, may be in the next Frascari Symposium, while the proceedings of this first one, will be published at the end of the year. In the meanwhile the interdisciplinary convergence realized in the symposium contributed to open new researches and investigation on an architectural experience, both from the side of designing and from the side of enjoying.



A few sketches by Marco Frascari in the symposium's poster and the cover of Marco Frascari's last work "Eleven Exercises in the art of architectural drawing: slow food for the architect's imagination".

A SELECTION OF MARCO FRASCARI'S WORKS

2011, Eleven Exercises in the art of Architectural Drawing: slow food for the architect's imagination, Routledge

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1995, Una pillola per sognare ... una casa, Progetti ed, Milano.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I have to thank Roger Connah for sending me all the papers and speeches he wrote to introduce the different moments of the Frascari Symposium. This short resume owes much to his work.

NOTES

[1] Gideon, Sigfried (1984), Spazio, Tempo Architettura, Ulrico Hoepli Editore, Milano, p. 190

[2] Suffice to remember that in all the many libraries of Bologna University, there is only one book with an essay by Marco Frascari: Cornoldi, Adriano (1995), L'architettura dell'Edificio Sacro, Officina, Roma.

[3] An essay published and translated in italian in Ferrante, Luigi (a cura di, 1973), *Samuel Beckett*, Utet, Torino, 1973, pp. 466-491

[4] Frascari, Marco (1986), Semiotica ab Edendo. Taste in Architecture, in Journal of Architectural Education, (vol. 40, no.1), pp. 2-7

[5] *Ibidem*, p.4

[6] Brillat-Savarin, Antheleme Jean (1847), *Phisiologie du Gout, ou meditations de Gastronomie Trascendante*, Charpentier Librerie Editeur, Paris, quoted in English in Frascari's essay.

[7] Perret, Auguste (1952), *Contribution à une théorie de l'architecture*, Cercle d'Études Architecturales Chez A. Wahl, Paris, quoted in French in Frascari's essay.

[8] Frascari, Marco (1986), Semiotica ab Edendo, p. 7

[9] Frascari, Marco (1991), *Monsters of Architecture. Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory*, Rowman & littlefield Publishers, Inc., USA, never translated in Italian.

[10] *Ibidem*, p 6

[11] von Landsberg, Herrad (1979), Hortus Deliciarum (1180), reprinted by The Warburg Institute, Leiden

[12] Frascari, Marco (1991), Monsters of Architecture, p. 6

[13] From Roger Connah's presentation.

[14] Emmons P., Lomholt J., Hendrix J.(2012), *The Cultural Role of Architecture. Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, Routlege, London

[14] Roger Connah, Informal introduction to the symposium in Frascari's Library, on February the 7th, 2013.

[15] Roger Connah, Formal introduction to Frascari's Symposium, on February the 8th, 2013.