Architettura: la ricchezza dell'indeterminazione

Architecture: the richness of indetermination

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Non conoscere che cosa sia l'architettura dovrebbe essere il pungolo più interessante per l'architettura contemporanea. Potrebbe accadere che proprio grazie a questa confusione un nuovo contesto di opportunità per la creatività e il dibattito potrebbe fiorire. L'architettura potrebbe diventare nuovamente la base per un racconto di significato entro le città, annodando il patrimonio materiale e immateriale. Gli edifici costituiscono luoghi che le persone abitano dall'interno e non come qualcosa di estraneo. Spazio e tempo sono realtà inevitabilmente connesse al disegno degli edifici mentre questi non sono necessariamente connessi al disegno degli oggetti. Il più prezioso strumento per gli studenti di architettura e design è pertanto l'incoraggiamento allo sviluppo di un pensiero critico, fantasioso e indipendente attraverso un processo di scoprire-facendo.

Not knowing what architecture is should be the most pressing challenge of architecture. It could be thanks to this confusion that a new environment of questioning and creative challenges could flourish. Architecture could once again become the basis for a meaningful tale within cities, weaving together material and immaterial heritage. Buildings constitute places that people inhabit from within and not as something outside of their realm. Spatial and temporal realities are inherent to the design of buildings while they are not necessarily inherent in the design of objects. The most valuable tool for architecture or design students is therefore the encouragement of critical, imaginative and independent thinking through his/her own discoveries in making. LB

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What is the most pressing challenge that architecture is asked to resolve today?

Perhaps architecture has been too concerned with resolving things. The supposition that architecture must solve problems is often masked with entities, authors and corporations that play a 'hero' role in order to benefit their own interests. The famous tale of the Tower of Babel may still offer some insight into such problematic state. Let us recall that, at one time, all of humanity spoke the same language and one day decided to build a tower that could reach and threaten divinity. Such an act of vanity was divinely punished with a confusion of tongues, causing people to spread around the world and speak different languages, thus forming diverse social, political, economical and cultural realities. The time has arrived, perhaps, when a confusion of languages must occur again for the sake of architecture. The increasing global and dominating economic groups around the world seem to be in charge of building the Tower of Babel once again, pushing small groups' individual and critical efforts into very dangerous margins. The manufacturing and homogenization of products and the speedy achievements in technology have blinded certain architects from seeing a discipline that cannot be described in productive or quantitative terms, nor considered as an anarchic whim. In fact, not knowing what architecture is should be the most pressing challenge of architecture, because it is thanks to confusion that humanity was able to discover diverse, innovative and ingenious ways of living. To allow confusion to flourish propitiates an environment of questioning, curiosity and creative challenges. This could favor the emergence of an architecture of living well as humans instead of pretending that we could be gods.

With respect to the design of the contemporary city; what is the role of architecture in managing urban phenomena?

The Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar once wrote, "Only in dreams, in poetry, in play do we sometimes arrive at what we were before we were this thing that, who knows, we are." The same author wrote a novel called Hopscotch that tells the parallel love story of two persons and two cities, Paris and Buenos Aires. In the novel, Cortázar allows us to see, smell and touch the cities through the immediateness of a feeling that is constructed through the interaction between the two characters. This is the role that architecture must play in the design of the contemporary city. Architecture must embrace the unquantifiable dreams, poems and playfulness of a fictive city that through its fiction has the potential to unfold eventually a new reality. This kind of storytelling represents a neglected territory by architects when designing cities. Already in 1936 Walter Benjamin brought to attention people's incapability of communicating their experiences, exposing the demise of storytelling.

In Mendoza, Argentina, every city street is bordered by channels of 40 cm wide by 60 cm deep. These channels were key to making the city a green oasis in the middle of a very dry landscape, as they carried water from the nearby Andes mountains snowmelt. Developed centuries ago by indigenous people, this watery network has been embedded in each citizen's everyday life since childhood. A place for playing, hiding, waiting for the water, or thinking, the acequias, as they are called, are not simply an element of infrastructure. More importantly, they have enabled thousands of stories to shape local residents' lives. New developments within the city, thought in isolation from the city's stories, do not include acequias. These acts of confabulatory erasure threaten the richness and meaning that architecture offers to the city.

Architecture and design have established an exchange that is both operational and perceptive; buildings are conceived as objects and objects are conceived by those who design buildings. Between architecture and design, is it possible to define boundaries or intersections?

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'Architects designing buildings as objects' is already a boundary with which architecture should be deeply concerned. While architects can design objects that are not in themselves architecture, I find it problematic that certain architects design their buildings as objects, often with little or a superficial relationship to their site and cultural context. Buildings are places inhabited by people, but the affirmation of buildings as objects eliminates the notion that inhabitation is a fundamental concern of architecture. When buildings are designed as objects, they lack the capacity to be places for people, since their goal is to be seen or photographed from a distance and not to make a place.

The syntactic intersection between design and architecture should be carefully written: architects can design both, buildings and objects, however, architects should not design buildings as objects or objects as buildings. The etymology of the word object implies 'a thing put before our eyes;' yet buildings constitute places that people inhabit from within and not as something outside of their realm. In addition, topological, spatial and temporal realities are inherent to the design of buildings that are not necessarily inherent in the design of objects. One strong intersection between the two realms rests in the tectonic and material ingenuity of how buildings and objects are designed and

made. Although the design of buildings and objects are obviously related, we should not conflate their inherent relationship with the site and inhabitants.

When giving advice to students, what is the most valuable tool that an architecture or design student ought to acquire during their studies?

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The most valuable tool for an architecture or design student is the encouragement of critical, imaginative and independent thinking through his/her own discoveries in making. This may be encouraged through the study of history, philosophy and fiction, as well as with a full immersion and awareness to details in seemingly unrelated everyday practices such as cooking, cleaning or letter-writing. This approach is sympathetic to Giambattista Vico's argument that imagination and memory must be nourished at the beginning of education without compartmentalizing knowledge into an analytic, Cartesian structure. Imagination and memory, the Italian thinker explains, are the most vigorous and potent forces of young students, thus they must be fostered during the educational journey. Philosopher Ivan Illich, in relationship to how students have been seeing education, once expressed that, "students have come to believe that all what can be learned must be taught, and all that is taught does not really mean much." It is important that this tendency is combated within architecture schools, and that education becomes more concerned with learning and not so much with teaching. Learning can be formalized through classes and workshops, but it can also happen through the telling of stories and making drawings, models or artifacts without prescribed rules or outcomes. Learning must challenge students to make their own discoveries. A place that supports the emergence of knowledge through thinking and making is perhaps a healthy place for learning. The things we learn and retain are those that mean something to us, thus the emotional aspect of learning needs to be considered in the matrix of architectural education that seems many times to have taken a prescriptive and scientific turn.