

La morte e la tomba dell'architetto

The Death and the Tomb of the Architect

Lo scopo di questo contributo è discutere l'architettura funebre del corpo dell'architetto nel suo momento di transizione tra lo spazio dei vivi allo spazio dei morti e nella sua destinazione finale più o meno eterna. Il cimitero che comprende di chi progetta cimiteri per tutti gli altri è frammentato in una miriade di differenze e loci. Eppure questo spazio ha i suoi simboli e il suo immaginario.

Chi è l'architetto che progetta il cimitero per tutti gli altri, e come lei / lui vede il suo / la sua morte e la tomba?

L'ambizione di questo lavoro è quello di violare lo spazio intimo degli "ultimi desideri" dell'architetto.

Ci sono alcune aspettative, alcuni luoghi comuni, alcuni intenti adeguati o in comune, che potrebbero dare all'architetto una dignità specifica in relazione alla dignità che immaginiamo per la morte degli altri?

The aim of this contribution is to discuss the funerary architecture of the body of the architect in its moment of transition between the space of the living to the space of the dead and in its more or less eternal final destination. The encompassing cemetery of those who design cemeteries for everybody else is fragmented in a myriad of differences and loci. Yet this space has its symbols and its imaginary.

Who is the architect who designs the cemetery for all the others, and how does she/he see her/his own death and tomb?

The ambition of this paper is to violate the intimate space of the "last desires" of the architect. Are there some expectations, some commonplaces, some appropriate or shared intents that might give to the architect a specific dignity in relation to the dignity we imagine for the death of the others?



Claudio Sgarbi

Architect (IUAV), MS, Ph.D (University of Pennsylvania), Adjunct Research Professor (Carleton University) practicing in Italy and lecturing in several universities in Canada, Europe and United States. His major fields of theoretical research concern the image, role and gender of the architect, the relation between neurosciences and architecture, the building technologies and the relevance of architectural history in our contemporary debate. He has published several articles and a book: Vitruvio Ferrarese. "De architectura": la prima versione illustrata, (Franco Cosimo Panini Editore, 2004). He is working on a publication with the title Misconceptions. The Infertile Belly of the Architect.

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All architects will go to hell. Because we are all so full of pride! The sin of hubris is our curse.

But this is how the architect thinks: "If we are all going to hell..... then can we, at least, design it?"

The title I have proposed is: "The death and tomb of the architect". It should be: "The death and tomb and the hell of the architect". Is there a proper way for an architect to get ready to die and be buried? How then?

This is one of those arguments that seems totally irrelevant on the even days and becomes tremendously interesting on the odd days. These aphorisms and notes are a revenge of one day upon another. They are the vendetta of the odd days.

Someone maintains that architects should be killed while they are still in the cradle.

How many architects were indeed unborn! A huge number if compared with those who had not been killed soon enough, before causing irreparable damages.

Fortunately, we assume that all architects will, sooner or later, pass away. Can you imagine if we had Le Corbu still around with his *maison domino* sprawled around the world?

Well, this is, indeed exactly the problem! Architects, we assume, die, but, I argue, they do not die enough. They never fully die. In which form they keep showing off even long after being buried?Like Ghosts,

Zombies?.....

Notwithstanding all the possible hopes for a clinical critical terminal state of modernity, modernity never dies. The power of its radical error is outrageous and has an incredible inertia.

Notwithstanding all the announcements about the imminent death of architecture, architecture is not dead, or it is not dead enough. May be we are just burying HER cadaver (I say HER because architecture still posses a female body) – and the burial ceremony takes its time. Or...we are giving her an autopsy, a dissection in our anatomical theatre. I repeat "her" because the personification of architecture with a female body – the body of all the Muses – has been quite a commonplace for centuries (actually for at least two millennia). So "*over her dead body*" is taking place all what is taking place in architecture today, *post mortem*.

We have heard so many accounts from the paladins of the Death of Architecture and the Architecture of Death. We must assume that architecture is not fully dead. We must assume that a lot of architects have probably died in vain since our necrophilous discipline is still asking for more sacrifices before reaching a satisfactory gratification.

We keep talking about the imminence of this death. Death is immanent in architecture only if we assume that death is immanent

everywhere else – that is a very nihilistic position. "God made everything out of nothing but the nothingness shows through". I think that "SHE" architecture and WE architects last, nihilistically, too long. Actually the real problem is (HER and OUR) eternity. In reality we always share some fragment of eternity and most of the bad or goods things we do shall remain forever.

Indeed the problem is not death, the problem are the cadavers and their remains.

The architect's "death drive" is a boulevard flanked by the most renowned buildings in the world, with an endlessly retreating vanishing point. The architect drives through (the strip) with a luxury convertible car. The main risk is a fatal accident with another (drunk) architect driving in the opposite direction. (Fig. 1).

We are so proud of our skills that we forget to question their very intimate nature. The hero of James Joice's novel *The Dead* is so passionately taken by his lust that he cannot believe that the object of his own desire was obscurely engaged in a love affair with a dead ghost! He, the craving lover, was going to take the place of a dead body, to become its substitute!

The desire of the other is unpredictable and there is a moment when my desire becomes the desire of the other. The hero's luxury must pass away (he is just a traditionalist high class gentleman) when confronted with

the necrophilous desire of his lover. This is exactly what happens with architecture.

The love affair between architecture and corpses.

Loos's sentence has become famous. "If we were to come across a mound in the woods, six foot long by three foot wide, with the soil piled up in a pyramid, a somber mood would come over us and a voice inside us would say: 'There is someone buried here'. *This is architecture.*" (Adolf Loos, *Architecture*, 1910) (Fig. 2)

How is it possible that this heap (sorites) of soil is architecture? Basically the heap of soil, piled up in a pyramidal shape, corresponds to the space occupied by the dead body below. It is this excess, hiding the deceased (ephemeral as it can be in this case), that which makes the wanderer in the wood to become aware of every destiny. The wanderer knows the paradox of the sorites, and may be this what the "voice inside" says. This is architecture. (Fig. 3)

Since our death is a current way of manifesting our destiny, what's the proper way for an architect to die? Poets and artists have heroic ways to die (often rooted in contradiction, curse and denial). Literary critics have been speculating very passionately on the proper way for a poet to die. *The Death of the Author* is a book that remains a point of reference for us.

The most direct answer, given by the people I

have interviewed, is: architects must die just like everybody else must die. But who are then these everybody else who must die and how are they supposed to die? Architects cannot escape the question because they are called upon to provide the "setting" where the death of the others takes place. Obviously the others are always those who die.

We are always and inevitably the spectators of other people's funerals.

The others are always those who die and we take care of the performance.

Procrastination seems one of our most practiced pastimes. Planned obsolescence would make an interesting counterpoint to this pastime.

If we pose the question directly there seems to be no answer and the question does not make sense at all. But if we confront the evidence then we have to make sense of it. Mnesicle died in a fatal accident on building site. Phidia was sentenced to death. Michelangelo died of age and consumption. Borromini committed suicide. Gaudi died of age, consumption, and of a fatal accident. Le Corbu died of age, consumption and drowning. Carlo Scarpa died of age, consumption and of a fatal accident (on building site). Gordon Matta-Clark died prematurely after a refused treatment. Etc, etc.....

Artists have been much more creative about



Fig. 1. The Architect's _Death Drive

their moment of conveyance. Yves Klein, "Leap into the Void", or Bas Jan Ader, more serious, "In Search of the Miraculous" are just two famous cases. Compared to the creativity in the search of a proper way to die exposed by the other artists, the architects' fantasy is rather scarce.

Investigate cases of architects who have killed other architects (literally or metaphorically). Find out which are the most common causes of fatal deaths between architects.

The theme of the suicide as a remedy for the remorse and the contrition, after a life spent celebrating the desire to show off, is really crucial for the architect. There was a famous poet who would not hesitate, when introduced to an architect in a public meeting, to slap him directly in his face, since he maintained "if you are an architect you must have done something wrong". There is a story in which the architect is executed by the residents of a condominium, for being considered guilty of all the faults that are present in the building. Killing the architect is an extreme remedy, but it is a vendetta that makes sense.

In the movie "The Belly of an Architect", the architect Stourley Kraklite commits suicide by jumping from a balcony of one of the many boastful monuments of the corrupted Rome right at the moment when his most profound disillusion about creativity became blatant, right at the moment when his wife – full of grace – loses her waters to give life to



Fig. 2 This is Architecture

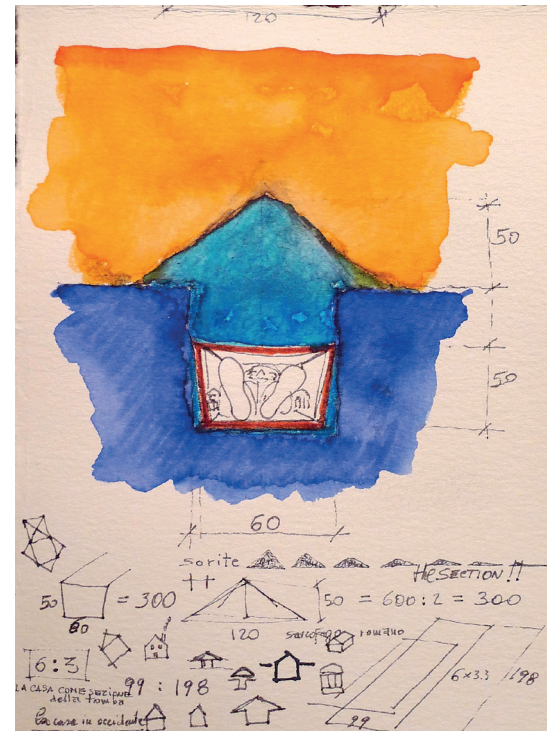


Fig. 3 Burial Excess. Sorites

a creature from inside. Suicide is a practice that keep inspiring architects. There is even a well-known webpage labelled "Death By Architecture". However there are always too many survivors. The first in the list of preferences, as an ideal way of dying for an architect, is the so called "natural death": after a peaceful retirement, while he reads the last monograph published by Electa or Skira on his first-and-foremost achievements in the realm of international architecture, comfortably lying down on his favourite harm-chair, the architect falls asleep and dies. Second on the list is (this is architecture students degenerative attitude): to be struck with heart attack in the throws and passion of love. This is a bit problematic because either you coordinate it very accurately with your partner or it turns out to be very embarrassing for the survivor!!! Moreover this type of death can be classified under the category of "death upon arrival". So, for the architect of the past this would be "dyeing on the building site". But this is not currently applicable any more – since it would have tremendous consequences on the liability frame, the building site timeline, the contractor, the client, the security coordinator....etc. So if death in ecstasy is the goal, to avoid abashing the partners, we might have to rely on a more solitary kind of entertainment.

But to die in front of a computer screen while on Rewit, or Rhino, or Archicad (or other porno web pages) is neither appealing nor dignifying. The death of Imhotep (mythical architect/magician/priest) deserves much attention. I will only refer to the 1932 movie directed by the legendary Karl Freund with Boris Karloff acting as Imhotep. It's a love and death story the one that ties the Imhotep and the princess Ankh-es-en-Amon. According to the movie director and the scriptwriter, the Pharaoh condemns the architect to suffer "the Nameless Death": a process of wrapping the body in bandages and burying him alive (eaten alive by beetles in the later version of "The Mummy"). Then the sarcophagus containing the architect and the magic Scroll of Thoth are buried together in a secret location, all the slaves who took part in the burial are killed by guards. And, to make sure that no one knows about Imhotep's secret, also the guards who killed the slaves are killed; which turns the process into an unrestrainable and uncontainable sequence of deaths. The theme of the architect as being damned to a tragic end, remains a constant into the universal fantastic. Architects are buried (literally beyond metaphorically) or killed by wealthy clients in order to protect a secret they share or just in order not to replicate the achievement (the

secret knowledge) they have gained during the process of construction of uniquely customized buildings. I believe that this is a habit just to avoid paying the bills. It was dramatized by clients to hide the practical scope of the action. The clients should know that, if they kill us in order not to pay the bills, we will never fully die and will certainly show up very ferociously at a later date!!! During excavations in the north of Italy a skull was found demonstrating a death inflicted with a brick forced into the jaws of the victim. The archaeologists are still investigating. Violent homicides must for sure have been perpetrated upon architects, their bodies being dismembered and violated. A violent death can be easily inflicted with a brick. It is superfluous to point out the logic behind: "Architect killed by a brick that did not want to be an arch". There are no reported cases of literal cannibalism between architects (while there are many cases of phenomenal cannibalism). There are many reported cases (both literal and phenomenal) of necrophilia. The case of Borromini's suicide, is one of the most interesting cases of architectonic suicide, mostly because of the competing relationship with Bernini. The typical psychotic (homoerotic) envy was sublimated by Borromini into suicide in order to private the other (Bernini) of his inspiring counterpart. The death of the one leaves the

other creatively incomplete (halved). (Fig. 4) The suicide of the architect who designed the Corviale is a popular myth. We go back to the idea that the architect should be conscious enough to punish himself fatally when the mistake is evident. But plenary indulgencies are constantly promoted by the politburo and the architects buy them all. (Fig. 5) The architect of the Corviale actually seems to have died of a heart attack during a violent discussion about his project. And this would be an interesting case to be carefully analysed.

There are two architects' deaths which I would like to compare. The one of Michelangelo and that of Carlo Scarpa.

Michelangelo is profoundly concerned about the design of his own tomb, but he decides to leave it incomplete. Very interesting is his decision to retreat, when the end of his life becomes immanent, in a humble isolation (even if he had accumulated a considerable amount of money). The extremely modest retreat, the decision to sculpt his Pietà with a marble block that was rejected because of its imperfections and the decision to burn most of his drawings before his death, CONTRASTS noticeably with the expropriation of his corpse (which was said to emanate an extraordinary perfume even several days after death), an expropriation perpetrated by the Florentine academia and politics. The funerals and the apparatuses were majestic. All the students

of the *Accademia del Disegno* had to touch Michelangelo's corpse which was then buried in a pompous monument, contrasting deeply with Michelangelo latest frugality.

Carlo Scarpa was not interested in using his money sparingly but I would like to point out the choice of a very modest location for his personal tomb - modest if we compare it to the blatant celebration of the tomb of the Brion family.

Both Michelangelo and Scarpa seem to be interested in exposing with moderation the last remains of their mortal life, probably, I suppose, for the purpose of making amends, asking pity for their sins. As if they were aware of the inevitable sin of hubris that the architect seems damned to commit. (Fig. 6) The myth of Daedalus is saturated with hubris. It is interesting to notice that in order to appease the supernatural forces, for he himself had reiterated this sin, he has to sacrifice a victim: his young son. The death of Icarus.

The architect sacrifices the other, not yet fully formed architect, deepening his guilt and his curse. We are infested by architects who make other people die in order to continue to perpetrate their self-celebrations. Architects are serial killers and they have a perfect plan to avoid consequences: the relations between the act and outcome (the cause and the effect) are never immediate and this is the method the killers have excogitated to

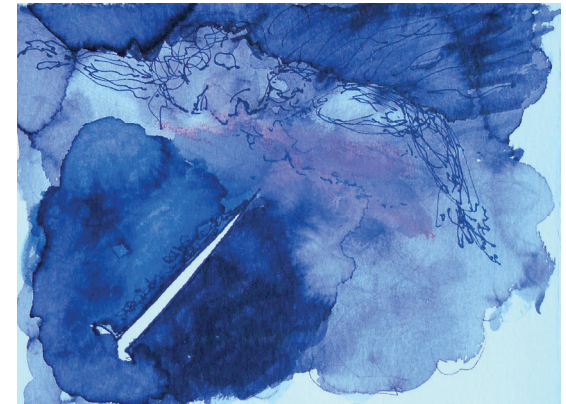


Fig. 4 Borromini's suicide

avoid serious penalties and to perpetrate the crime. (Fig. 7)

Another mythical master builder (known also with the name of Manole) sacrificed a woman, his wife or a passer by (according to the several versions of the myth), before meeting with his own death falling miserably, while trying to fly away, from the roof of the very building he had designed and built. (Fig. 8)

A deferred homicide is something that architects constantly commit. We always end up killing others; in many cases we do it very softly. The others always end up dying in the buildings we design! We have been killing them softly in order to provide us with corpses to be buried in the very cemeteries we design - in other words we create the need for a drama we know how to satisfy visually and formally. The house is a shelter to introduce us inadvertently into death. The city is an introduction to the cemetery - even if someone maintains that the latter anticipate the former.

The intermittence of death and the intermittence of cemeteries frame the landscape of our survivals. But fortunately we forget about it. Architects cultivate forgetfulness.

Architects are very creative in killing the others but they need to be more creative about killing themselves.

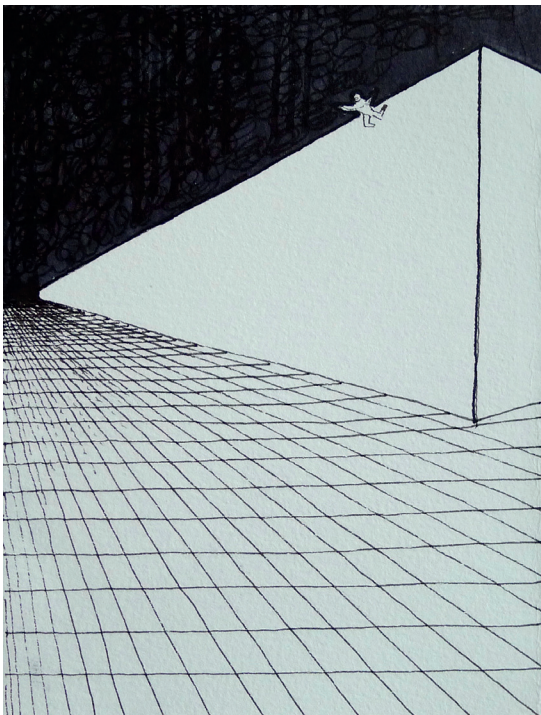


Fig. 5 The Architect's Suicide



Fig. 6 Carlo Scarpa's Burial

If we analyse the tombs of architects, we realize that the field of research is still uncontaminated. We need to have access to testaments (and testaments are private acts that are not always available), in order to provide an accurate account on the last will of the architects.

The tombstone is meant to manifest a simple reference or a principle rooted in the career of the architect. Good examples are the tombstones of Buckminster Fuller, Alvar Aalto, Frank Lloyd Wright, Bruce Goff. We should open the discussion about the archaic tradition of the likeness between buildings and portable urns, the "houses of the soul" or "*minima domicilia*".

I just want to point out the coherence established in the case of the tombstones of Mies Van Der Rohe and Adolf Loos. Coherence after death. This is what we all claim: the tombstone must proclaim a continuity of the principles established in the lifetime. But: does the tombstone look like a building designed by the architect or does the building look like a tombstone? The necessity to make life coherent with death is one of the many paradoxes we are bound to expose.

How many tombstones and funerary monuments were taken as a reference for the architecture of the living? John Soane's funerary pavillion is just one of the most interesting cases. Fate wanted it to become



Fig. 7 Daedalus Flying on Icarus' Relics

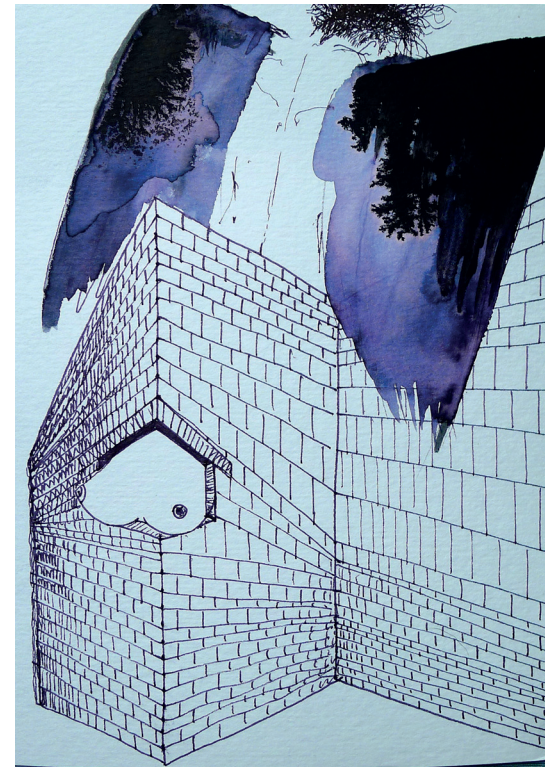


Fig. 8 Mastro Manole's Deadly Flight

the famous British telephone boot and since then the shape has reached a different eternity.

Le Corbu tomb is another interesting topic of discussion but I would like to point out here just the sublimation of his death: his desire to retreat into silence, the reiteration of the testament, the procrastination and the wait for the death through *The Poem of the Right Angle* (a reflection on the ineffable nature of space), and the final enigmatic text *Mise ou point*, finalizing the Euclidian dilemma on the point (something whose part is nothing – *semeion* or *stigmata*?) and its fixation. The issue of drowning into the sea is really crucial. And even the final moment bears significance: did Père Corbu eventually try to save himself while he was drowning by waving his famous hand crying for help? Would this eventual extreme inappropriate act corrode his glory? We have to pay particular attention to what we do right up to the end. (Fig. 9)

The image of the architect who dies while receding back in order to see his creation from a distance (the “sweet” fatal perspective, or the literally “accidental” (“inverted”?) perspective) is also crucially important for this research. The fact that it was reported as a primary injury and/or the final cause of death in several cases (Carlo Scarpa’s being the most famous one) is fundamental. (Fig. 10)

Architects often step back to better see what they are doing (now just to take pictures) and (since they are not like Janus with eyes also in the back), they can fall miserably (like Taletes) and fatally. After the “Nude Descending the Stairway” (the last painting of Duchamp) we could have the Dude Descending to Hell as the last fatal accident in the life of the architect. (He will certainly go to hell because this receding, this stepping back in order to see the creation from a privileged distance is obviously a sin of hedonism). (Fig. 11)

It would be important to give some suggestions about how to practice “euthanasia for architects”, that is an appropriate ways to “leave the scene”.

The idea of an extremely passionate dedication to INCOMPLETENESS, a full commitment to a design that contains a very good reason to be unfinished (non-finito), seems comforting. This does not mean absolutely to be inconclusive, but to find a good reason to pass on the end.

This is the most heroic choice that architects should make to celebrate their passing: to dedicate all moments of their immanent death to the most indeterminate project they can think being worth to be handed on to others. (Fig. 12)



Fig. 9 Drowning Le Corbu

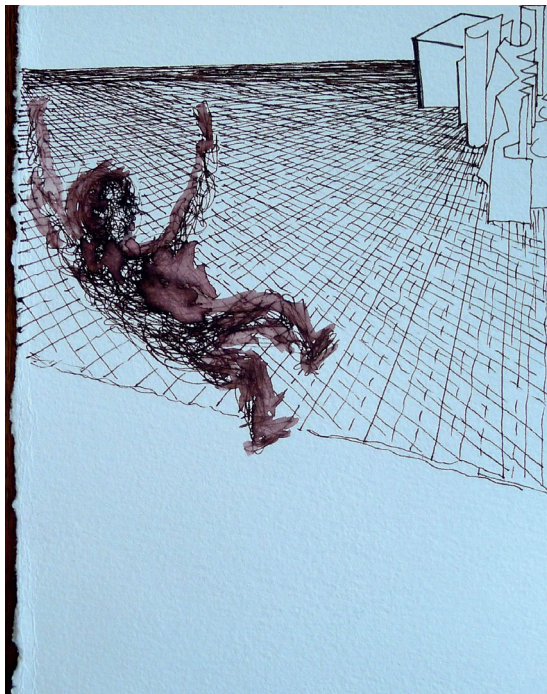


Fig. 10 Receeding Architect. Perspectiva Accidentalis



Fig. 11 Dude Descending to Hell



Fig. 12. Tomb Carrier