

SEVERAL C-WORDS CONCERNING ARCHITECTURE

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This text is a reflection on the state of contemporary architecture, the way it manifests itself and is perceived in our surroundings as well as in publications. All images were taken during a trip through Switzerland in July 2008, representing the main subjects of this text, sometimes in a truly referential sense but more often only as resonance. This interlacing of visual reflections creates an opening for the emergence of other ideas. *Les mots et les choses*.

One point needs to be clarified right away. '*What do we study when we are studying architecture?*' was the title of the 1997 exhibition by Andrea Deplazes in the *Architekturmuseum* in Basel where projects of the ETH-students were shown. In a similar way, as an architect and also as a University College teacher, I question some fundamental ideas of architecture.

Let's make one thing clear from the start: none of us wants architecture to get further out of hand. So let's reconsider the basis of our profession, i.e. we need to go back to the proper roots of architecture, to its history, to the 'basic forms' (*Grundformen* as Oswald Mathias Unger said), while at the same time having a method for its transformation in mind: the city as an assembly point for autonomous thoughts, forms, meanings and images. Let's forget about being busy with other professions that don't belong to architecture. Let's command respect again. But can there be other interesting starting points to conquer the world of architecture all over again? Is it not possible that contemporary research in sciences – on sustainability, on durability, on health and on wellness – can create new basic forms that architecture utilizes to root itself in the context of today? Is it not the new task of architects to be busy with wellness? With feeling good in spaces?

Starting with the fundamental difference in the way a community handles its concerns about the appropriate attitude, **CITIZENSHIP** is the first item to be discussed. Citizenship is a basic need that should be brought to the centre of attention of everything. It deals with civilization, the way in which a community organizes, and maybe even controls itself, in which the rules to create discipline originate. This happens both in democratic as well as in totalitarian regimes. It's a truism (the recent discourse on the Beijing *Bird's Nest* by Herzog & de Meuron and the reactions on whether or not an architect should participate in such regimes) that it is possible to create meaningful architecture in both contexts. But leaving this aside, citizenship is more about self-discipline, the logical thought that the common good is maintained respectfully. This assumes that the global outline (see: the space between the buildings) is designed with the same attitude, with a specific idea on form, with an attitude of logical evidence. Cartography – map or layer – makes it possible to situate different architectures on a (mental) level that is constructed and supported by a community. This is the answer to a democratic gesture: monuments and common buildings both take up space.

It is sad not to design this open space, to leave it to an anarchistic thought and resort to an 'à l'improviste' attitude, with an accent on fragmentation, even on exception. And a public space that is not subjected to argument is void of anything out of the ordinary. A nation that sees itself purely as a community of individuals and never manages to go beyond that – and thus manifesting this individualism publicly – leads to desolation, moves to *laissez-aller*. Strangely enough, this is an authoritarian gesture of the individual that spills over to the global coding of democracy. Anarchy as a counter fact.

Most people consider architecture to be the raising of buildings, and not the design of the ‘space in between’. More specifically, in this first example of citizenship, this results in objects that are linked to each other by public space. They represent modernity, an intrinsic search for new possibilities, and reflect and support this ‘space in between’. In the second example, objects need to behave themselves in a proper context, if not they will become autistic images (splendidly published, perfectly cut next to the facades). This leads inevitably to the choice between ‘autism and empathy’. Or, stated differently, when there is no civilization present (which has at the same time an empathic feeling), the empathy needs to be integrated into the objects of architecture.

Citizenship thus deals immediately with and is one of the main substances of **CONTEXT**. Every country has its own way of building and there are hardly any things that can be taken as being known or that can easily be displaced. But the idea of context contains more than what has been built. Without inventions or the creation of needs, there wouldn’t be any evolution. New forms aren’t interesting as long as they aren’t linked to new technologies, new constructive inventions and materials, or a new way of living (which deals automatically with another political-philosophical-social system). Context is the notion of all essential things that are present today and in a totally different way than yesterday.

The invention of steel in the 19th century was of extreme importance, just like the invention of concrete in the 20th century. But are such inventions still evident today? Are such inventions still taking place in the material world? Materials will probably be in relation to re-use, to sustainability. The context nowadays is as much global (community) as local (building on one specific site), but never in history were both of them so closely intertwined. We are living differently; we need to be conscious of taking care of future generations. History becomes future immediately and vice versa. But too many images are being copied and erected on whatever place available out of an idea of creating icons as *schmuck*, thus being foreign when not empathic.

As a result, every building and each way of reflecting on building contains the idea of **CONTINUITY**. We are aware that modernity is not something that was invented from scratch at the beginning of the 20th century and thus created a new kind of architecture. Modernity starts in the 18th century, with the period of Enlightenment (look at the projects by Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu: they are still important in respect to contemporary movements in architecture). And thus new worldviews and ideals do have their importance for creating new ideologies and new spaces. Strangely enough, the setting of modernism (not to be confused with either modernity or modernism itself) should be seen as a discontinuity in the evolution of architecture, thus giving itself other specifics, other distortions. So, for example, the visual dissolution of power that before always showed itself as a symmetrical concept, in modernism used asymmetry as an image. This is not a plea for either solution; we know that there is a need for different forms that give other concepts such as void, chaos, and fragmentation the possibility to gain importance. Again, it’s about developments connected to worldviews and visions. Only now, these images are developed out of solitary, autonomous projects, but the basics remain the same as history exemplifies: no architecture without economics, nothing without money.

Only a few exceptional people know how to make the best of what is available on earth given the economic possibilities, the Medicis being a foremost example. (We of course only refer to this specific part of their attitude.) But today, there are not so many people around who maintain these standards when in an official leading role. How would the world look if the Medicis were still around today? What kind of culture would be integrated into our buildings?

CULTURE in that sense is an expression of an attitude of how to deal with things. In this way architecture is always culture, 'building culture' (*Baukultur*) at its best, and in that sense, inseparable. Culture thus focuses on the theme of context, on what makes a building or public space architecture in relation to cultural phenomena and vice versa: how to give cultural phenomena a new architectural expression.

Themes that show the relationship of the individual to the architectural object as being the empathic meaning of architecture, the research on utopian ideas and visions, the role of ethic and ideology, these are all particulars that support the current discourse. But historical models, their translation into the present day coding with its emphasis on the duality of classical versus modern, also play a crucial role. What is the status of the European city in the 21st century from a cultural point of view? Are buildings just solitary objects or are they subjects in the public debate?

Besides this, a certain number of examples introduce stories and thoughts on the ornament, the scenography of the public space, the readability and the understanding of architecture, tectonics and symbolism as a value. Themes such as building culture, urban culture, the culture of image and experiences, are all actual items that go beyond an a priori beauty. They go beyond the looking at and writing about a building, beyond knowing and understanding, beyond cognition and recognition.

In fact, culture means the introduction of a **CONCEPT** into the work of architecture. But, first of all the difference between a concept and an idea needs to be discussed. A concept is a clear architectural statement about the basic intention of a building. A concept can be further developed in a process in order to become more present in the spaces, thus connecting inherent spatiality to the idea of a concept. In this sense, having an idea does not get any further than just having an idea because it does not connect to the realities of building itself, of architecture. So, having an idea comes before having the concept. Thus, a wrong question cannot possibly generate a good concept, let alone a good building. Does the distinction between the words 'idea' and 'concept' offer a point of departure for turning other professions or items such as, for example, design into a concept for architecture?

It's the elaboration of a concept in itself that deals with the best interior space and with the readability of the object in the urban texture. One cannot separate these from each other. In history this was solved in the thickness of the walls, thus creating the possibility that the interior could generate a vast concept on its own and the exterior was linked to its environment. This has nowadays (economically and imaginatively) lost almost all of its importance. Walls are reduced to a thickness of 20 mm. The enclosure of a space is translated into transparency. Complexity and contradiction in terms of architecture. Paul Virilio even talks about '*trans-appearances*': going beyond transparency... A concept is what a building has for being good architecture, it has a coherent structure, and it has a story. Sometimes it even has dissonances, inconveniences. It's all about transposing an idea into an architectural language. Only this is a concept.

A concept deals with the conveyance of knowledge. Architects need to study architecture, they need to learn what architectural thoughts and concepts can be. It's not only about length, width, height, but also about depth. One might ask whether it is right to present elaborate studies – sometimes going into great detail – on a specific, well-defined site without any reflective component. Is the only concern of a project nowadays its volumetric substance or is it also about the depth of its architectural themes, about understanding the underlying reasons, creating beautiful spaces, turning a study process into an attitude so that somebody can evaluate it into the reality of architecture? Isn't it the task of every professional to involve his audience in his study? Isn't it the task of architects to react against their clients? Can we translate

well-drawn projects into 3D without taking the time to explore concept, content and context, and thus touching tectonics, light and space, gravity?

Talking about floating versus gravity: a building is not an airplane, nor is it a cloud. It stands on the surface of the earth, it is rooted on a site, and it has a specific context. Airplanes are constructed to remain in the air; buildings need to be constructed to stand on the ground. Even the '*Wolkenbügel*' project by El Lissitzky is situated on a dense crossing in Moscow, having three main columns supporting the horizontal levels. Nor do Zaha Hadid's or Coop Himmelb(l)au's projects float. Why are architects always using the wrong words to explain their concepts?

Today nothing seems simpler than designing big projects without bearing any responsibility towards either the individual or the common good. Let's call this *self-branding* ... It's much more difficult to take responsibility for the real obstacles we face when building in a real environment than to design projects on paper that are widely published and never meant to be built, but give the designer-architect star status...

Many building programs focus on the idea of temporary branding and marketing structures. Clients force architects to push themselves into their own world of urban advertising. Are they thus not turning the building in its urban context into publicity instead of making it public? What is the task of the architect: taking the evolution of the city at heart or trying to primarily satisfy the client or even him/herself? Is it about saying 'yes' to the public space or saying 'yes' to the individual? Is it possible for these two to come together in town centres? What is the movement of suburban structures in city centres? What is the new life style? Can architecture deal with life style? Can it deal with fashion? What does the new generation of architects think they can do with it?

At this point, our central point of departure is our concern to adjust our concept to reality, not by being intellectual but by being intelligent, understanding the site, knowing the context, giving it content, and using a program as an excuse to explain something in architecture. Use it, never abuse it.

Each concept deals with **CONTENT**. Content is a very risky item: it is not always immediately visible but is mostly sensed. It is something an architect aggregates out of a range of possible characteristics, sometimes by opting for an intelligent construction, sometimes by choosing a specific setting, sometimes by borrowing from another cultural expression closely related to architecture.

To quote the American artist Ian Wilson: "*It is not necessary to know what the ultimate form of the absolute is. It is enough to know that pervading our awareness it takes the form of our awareness.*

Of that perfect awareness: would it see itself as bound by a linear order of time? No. The past, present and future exist simultaneously in the awareness of the absolute."¹

These notes, (cf. *Discussions*) show in an original way the theme of *The Absolute*. Wilson tries to understand the abstraction of the absolute. But what is the absolute when talking about architecture? Is it the mental territory of thinking, of acting or of what we never explain but nevertheless integrate? A recent work by Wilson (a series of 20 books) just shows one word on each page: *Perfect*.

During the last decennia, architecture has become one of the most important subjects of photography. This is not new. Already in 1460 a student of Piero della Francesca painted the famous *Veduta della città ideale* (Palazzo Ducale, Urbino) in which different architectures were represented as one urban entity. Some three centuries later, a similar story is visible in *Rialto con il ponte secondo il progetto di*

Palladio e con altri edifici palladiani by Antonio Canaletto (1759), (Galleria Nazionale, Parma). Aldo Rossi wrote that this painting contains “*the ability of the fantasy, started out of the concrete*”.

Taking the standpoint that the architect is continuously passing on his knowledge of construction, the essence of being an architect changes into contributing to that evolving reality. This means that his main concern should be plotting his course in developing a personal vision. Now the question arises: “How does architecture presently manifest itself and how can one add to the process of conveyance of the established content?” But, what is ‘knowing’? What is going further? What do we know? How do we define this knowledge? What does conveyance of knowledge mean in language, in image, in thoughts? How can we implement this? On what level is the relationship between culture and art manifest in architecture? With economy? With history? With context? With experience? What is content?

Seen in terms of light, architecture, in se static, becomes architecture of movement, of dynamics. The zenithal opening in the Pantheon roof in Rome, the light sequences between the columns of the Parthenon on the Acropolis, the baroque light in the spaces by Francesco Borromini, the ‘*canons de lumière*’ by Le Corbusier, are all witnesses of the importance of ‘natural’ light to bring poetic force, also meaning to the architectural space. Light as structure, as material without materiality. Borromini’s last words before his death “*Luce! Dammi luce!*” (Light! Give me light!), are therefore of extreme importance because they clearly reflect the essence of (his) architecture: light as an elusive element, always changing, but defining the ‘being’ of a building and therefore being the fourth dimension. Without ‘being’ no architecture, no content.

Being is not an element only related to the classical, to history or the past. Now some new themes will be introduced, which reflect the new way of living, showing the **CONTEMPORANEOUS** of architecture and architectural programs, resulting out of new diagrams. Today leisure has become the new program, introduced already in the 19th century (as if nobody has to work!). So ‘promenades’, ‘flâneries’, free time, etc., are taken into account. We all know about the villa Savoye and although we can understand the meaning of Le Corbusier in his five points of architecture, which one can see as being the complete opposite of the five points of classical architecture, the concept (or is it idea?) of his ‘promenade architecturale’ is being used or even sometimes abused in building forms, routings, thus architecture expresses the routing in its form. This expression by Le Corbusier is often used to create promenades between buildings, thus becoming a permit to typify a building strategy. But creating a kind of second ground level when there is no need, taking global views and more ground plots than necessary, is it all the result of a new architectural research? Finally: is passing becoming a main item in contemporary architecture rather than being? Aren’t we forgetting that there is a need for ‘being’ in a building rather than looking at it as a coincidental visitor? No architecture is ever made, built or just constructed to be seen, to act just for spectators. Only now a building can become a spectacle, needed only in terms of a visit.

The same happens with the natural versus nature. It’s obvious that architecture should have a meaning which is natural, that forms are of a self-explanatory order, understandable, readable without any questioning at first sight. A building needs to be understood by everybody but also needs different layers when looked at more profoundly. Architecture is thus reacting to nature, being a cultural intervention into nature. This does not mean we can’t look at natural structures. But the way of transforming these structures immediately needs a material form. It needs an architectural expression. We can’t just take images from nature, we can’t copy nature

but we can study and get inspired by the images from, by or with nature. So what, where and how is nature related to architecture?

In fact, all this is about responsibility of the contemporary world and the transfer to new generations. We are using this globe with more than six billion people, and we all inherit the whole landscape for which we need to take care. So our task is clear at that point. Donald Judd once said "*one can only build on places where one has built before*". Although we can't trace this quote all the way, we should look at some urban developments like for example, in China. But as architects, we all need to remain critical of the use of land. So we can ask ourselves whether it is normal that green spaces and/or void landscape structures are used to situate architecture when there is no need for it. What are we leaving to the next generation? What is the idea of consciousness in architecture?

This next generation will live and work with architecture in a totally different way. Never in history, has architecture been so widely published. **CRITIQUE** has become a main item, not so much in respect to content, but in respect to the superficial knowledge of new forms. We see that the first architect to come up with a new form is the most well known and respected, only until a new form is developed by somebody else. *Condom-architecture* ...

Architectural magazines and websites play an even more important role in the development of this way of dealing with architecture. Reviews such as *Domus*, *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *Casabella*, *Zodiac*, *Quaderns* and many others, are all presenting a well defined period, a specific architectural expression, stipulated by their editor-in-chief. Gio Ponti, Aldo Rossi, Vittorio Lampugnani have all started an evaluative process, which at first sight was not visible but which – certainly in some countries – has gained enormous influence. And by now the status of the magazine has even been surpassed by the Internet.

In relation to this, the publication of architecture in itself becomes an important fact, inherently connected to the medium itself, but also as an expression to the world outside. As a medium and as an image, architecture marks its presence in every possible publication, from ordinary to glossy, from daily to exclusive, from informative to theoretical. To publish is to make known, to be recognized. No need to also mention that certain groups, schools, institutes, etc., have their own circuit to create a world of their own. The *Cooper Union* in New York, the *Architectural Association* in London, *Collegi de Arquitectes de Catalunya*, have all widely published their own educational systems of theoretical courses and thus defined their own reflections and research on architecture. And also creating new movements... all with the idea of publish or perish...

To reflect on the relationship between publications and subjects, between leading role and copy, between copy and paste, between thinking and executing, and to reflect on periodical developments such as deconstructivism, etc., are all much more interesting, not only because it's about a strategy of publication towards a large audience, but also because it's about maintaining a strategy of one's own.

Besides this, it's a well-known fact that a lot of these kinds of architects, institutes, publishers, are to be found in a specific community, which is quite an interesting phenomenon in itself. The reason for its existence is dealing with text and images. Being present all over the world means being connected to the dissemination of information.

The new (young) generation deals with critique in a different way. Can we even talk about critique when we realise that nowadays it is paramount to be known? But this new generation generally deals differently with the aforementioned items: citizenship is reduced to individuality, context has changed, continuity means today, culture stands for subculture, a concept can be whatever, there is no need for content as

such, contemporaneous deals with being present and critique is not about understanding.

Andy Warhol stated in his autobiography "*In the future everybody will be famous for 15 minutes.*"² In fact, fifteen minutes is just the time needed to read an article, send an sms to a befriended architect saying, "*I know it, I saw it*". But what about expressing "...?"

Some other features can be added to this list, such as **CONSISTENCY** – the ability to combine most of the aforementioned words into one project – **CONSCIOUSNESS** – the mental attitude of awareness while making architecture – and **CONSTRUCTION** – the creation of spaces as well as the verbal discourse and dialogue to make architecture possible.

With each of the aforementioned C-words, we want to show our upright intention and responsibility to act against a decline of culture, against a growing negativism and cynicism, but most of all, against a superficial attitude that is nothing more than a fashionable flare-up that is turning architecture into a desirable design object.

¹ Wilson, I., 'Working Notes 2003', *Newspaper Jan Mot* 40, Brussels, January 2004

² Warhol, A. *THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, Harvest, 1977