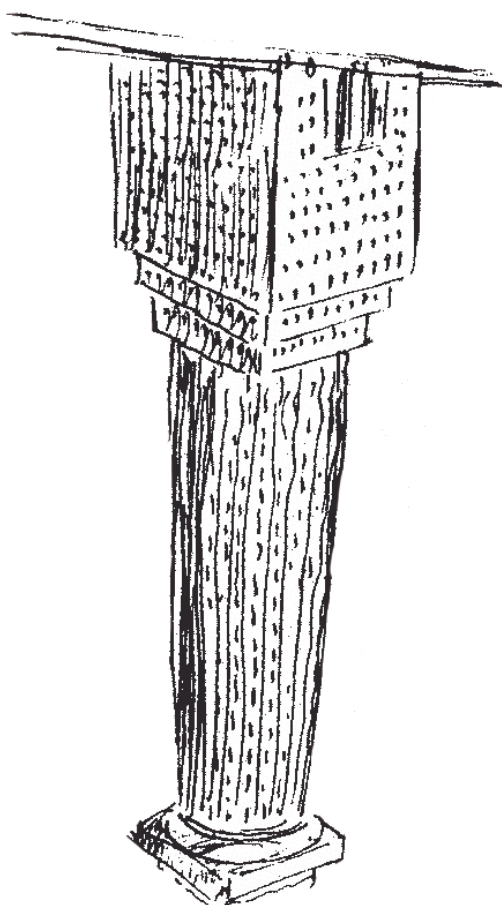


**Riccardo Canella**

# **Composing Architecture Through Context, Type and Figure**

Generational breviary



Nuova serie di architettura  
**FRANCOANGELI**

## Informazioni per il lettore

Questo file PDF è una versione gratuita di sole 20 pagine ed è leggibile con **Adobe Acrobat Reader**



La versione completa dell'e-book (a pagamento) è leggibile **con Adobe Digital Editions**.

Per tutte le informazioni sulle condizioni dei nostri e-book (con quali dispositivi leggerli e quali funzioni sono consentite) consulta [cliccando qui](#) le nostre F.A.Q.



**Riccardo Canella**

**Composing Architecture  
Through Context,  
Type and Figure**

Generational breviary

Nuova serie di architettura  
**FRANCOANGELI**

The following text contains Italian terms and expressions accompanied by an English translation. This editorial choice aims to preserve the complexity and richness of these terms and expression, which cannot be translated accurately in English.

The acronym (FTBA) indicates a free translation by the author.

Edited by: Massimo Pedretti

Graphic: Massimo Pedretti

Italian translation: Guido Canella Jr., Laura Canella, Maria Greto, Massimo Pedretti

Cover image: Reverse study drawing of *The "Chicago Tribune" Headquarters project*, 1922, by Adolf Loos (re-elaboration by the author).

Isbn: 9788835176602

Copyright © 2024 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milano, Italy.

This work, and each part thereof, is protected by copyright law.  
Text and Data Mining (TDM), AI training and similar technologies rights are reserved.  
By downloading this work, the User accepts all the conditions of the license agreement  
for the work as stated and set out on the website  
[www.francoangeli.it](http://www.francoangeli.it).

# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Foreword</b> , <i>Davide Borsa</i>   | 9         |
| On the way to architecture  | 9         |
| Free for all: a new Golden Age?   | 14        |
| An open question: the false prophecy of the deconstructionist advent                          | 16        |
| <b>Preface</b>  | <b>19</b> |
| A generational <i>compendium</i> of architectural composition                                 | 19        |
| <b>Place</b>  |           |
| The “universal” column by Loos  | 27        |
| Place of the <i>Pioneers</i> and place of the <i>Masters</i> of the Modern Movement           | 29        |
| Post-war era: listening to the place and historicist nostalgias in the poetics of the masters | 31        |
| The Venice paradigm in the versions of three famous masters                                   | 32        |
| Respect for the place in Italian architecture before and after the last war                   | 33        |
| The Milan paradigm  | 34        |
| Place and “non-place” today   | 37        |
| Geographical place and historical place. Transplantation and evocation                        | 39        |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Continuity in presence, distance in absence | 40 |
| Context and <i>atopia</i>                   | 41 |

### **Theme**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Reasons for modern architecture: the factory and the palace                    | 55 |
| New aesthetics or satisfaction of mass aspirations?                            | 57 |
| Public or private clients?   | 58 |
| Between the two World Wars: from peripheral housing to urban planning petition | 59 |
| Ideal: recondite, secret, religious  | 60 |
| Ideals and functions in the alternation of dominant themes                     | 61 |
| The becoming of function   | 63 |
| Post-war era: from the peripheral district to the historic center              | 64 |
| USA, where the city is renewed by separate functional sectors                  | 66 |
| Imported models for the tertiary development of the Italian city               | 67 |
| Place and theme, in a steep countertrend                                       | 70 |

### **Form**

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| The CIAM and the second and third generations of the Modern Movement | 81         |
| The revisionism of the subsequent generations                        | 85         |
| A neo-avant-garde project  | 87         |
| Postmodernity and Postmodernism                                      | 89         |
| White and Gray   | 91         |
| 1973 and 1980: the “state of the art” in two exhibitions             | 93         |
| Architecture as technique, as event, as decoration                   | 95         |
| Place, theme, form: two visions                                      | 99         |
| <b>Postscript</b> , <i>Massimo Pedretti</i>                          | 113        |
| Intention or performance?  | 113        |
| <b>References</b>  | <b>121</b> |
| <b>Index</b>   | <b>129</b> |

He had nothing of the seaman about him. If he had told us that he was an architect we would have not been surprised. For myself (I confess it was an absurd notion), he gave me the impression of a sort of a sacristan.

Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow Line*





# *Foreword*

Davide Borsa

## **On the way to architecture**

Oh prophets with your backs to the sea,  
with your backs to the present, oh conjurers,  
serene of soul, peering into the future,  
oh shamans ever-leaning on the railing –  
to leaf once through a paperback  
is enough to grasp you!

Reading bones, stars, shards,  
for the common good, reading entrails  
for what has been and what will come –  
Oh science! Blessed art thou,  
blessed are thy rays of hope,  
half-bluff and half-statistic: manners of death,  
money supply targets, waxing entropy...

Carry on! These sulfur-yellow illuminations  
are better than nothing, they amuse us  
on steamy summer evenings:  
bales of paper fresh from the computer,  
samples, excavations, pointers  
per the Delphi Method – bravo!<sup>1</sup>

1. In C. Shea, A translation of *Der Untergang der Titanic: Eine Komödie* by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Bard College, New York 2014.

How does the miracle occur – the event that transforms dwelling into architecture? Has the moment prefigured by Plato, who described architecture as the science of dwelling, finally arrived? Will the science of building finally replace architecture once and for all? Can we finally dispense with ideologies and sociologies, seen as superstructures, and focus solely on the beating heart of the discipline? Plato wrote: «And does not the same principle hold in the sciences? The object of science is knowledge (assuming that to be the true definition), but the object of a particular science is a particular kind of knowledge; I mean, for example, that the science of house-building is a kind of knowledge which is defined and distinguished from other kinds and is therefore termed architecture. Certainly. Because it has a particular quality which no other has? Yes. And it has this particular quality because it has an object of a particular kind; and this is true of the other arts and sciences? Yes»<sup>2</sup>.

What is the profound, essential reason that distinguishes this activity and its products from industrial design, applied arts, decoration, scenography, and representation? Architecture is undoubtedly a practice distinguished from other forms and has built a strong, unique status, positioned itself among the traditional *quadrivium*, since the Renaissance on. Architecture shares connections with sculpture, utilizing the third dimension, and painting, but is extended into its own autonomous “territory” with a *status* that remains elusive and resistant to rigorous analysis, as it is neither purely science nor pure expression.

The effort that has been made since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century to get architecture a “scientific” foundation, abandoning historicist eclecticism to rebuild the discipline on new, “universal” bases, and to adapt its formal repertoire to the new properties and chances offered by scientific advances and material progress, should be considered in relation with the broader epistemological re-foundation undertaken by disciplines such as philosophy (Husserl), mathematical sciences (Hilbert), and later linguistics since the 1970s onward. This linguistic movement proposed viewing language as a “universal invariant” across different and variable local languages in meaning and space, which semiotics generalized into a study of communication and signs: «The general problem of the sign.

2. In Plato, *The Republic*, IV, 438 D, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1903.

The sign as a general notion with respect to particular classes of signs»<sup>3</sup>. Linguistics thus allowed us to formulate the first hypothesis of universal specific principles capable of summarizing the entire history and evolution of architecture, postulating its autonomy and independence from the conditions and conventions that had defined the contextual character of its genesis, while preserving formal rules (of composition) shared with other arts like music and painting.

From the 1970s through the 1980s, this responsibility – given the obsolete proposals by activist architects shaped by or influenced by modernist avant-garde movements – was absorbed by literary criticism, theory, and semiology, which sought to apply structuralist, semiological, and linguistic methods to architecture to achieve the desired scientific objectivity and methodological rigor. This was, in brief, the same success achieved in applying these principles to the history, tradition, and analysis of literature and poetry, which was able to encompass under the universal model of language (of language itself) its most varied manifestations, from familial idiolect to high poetry, traversing tradition and history along the way.

Despite the generosity and commitment shown both internationally and nationally, notably through the work of Cesare Brandi<sup>4</sup> and Umberto Eco<sup>5</sup>, efforts to comprehensively incorporate architecture as a “sign” within a general semiotics framework, as Eco envisioned, or to integrate it within a general theory of expression, as Brandi intended, did not achieve the intended results and did not become central in subsequent developments. Nonetheless, these efforts provided architectural culture with refined analytical and critical tools. At the very least, the linguistic-semiotic perspective ignited critical-discursive strategies that sustained a fertile dialogue with contemporary art, culminating

3. In R. Jakobson, *Lo sviluppo della semiotica*, Bompiani, Milan 1978, p. 35 (FTBA).

4. Cf. C. Brandi, *Struttura e architettura*, Einaudi, Turin 1967; Id., *Teoria generale della critica*, Einaudi, Turin 1975 (an original approach blending Italian historicism, phenomenology and French structuralism); D. Borsa, *Le radici della critica di Cesare Brandi*, Guerini e Associati, Milan 2000; Id., *Epifania dell'astanza. Joyce, Brandi e il modernismo tradito*, in VV. AA., D. Borsa (edited by), *Memoria, identità, luogo. Il progetto della memoria*, Maggioli Editore, Rimini 2012. pp. 381-452.

5. Cf. U. Eco, *La struttura assente. La ricerca semiotica e il metodo strutturale*, Bompiani, Milan 1994 (an increasingly outdated semiotic approach linked to American pragmatism; see the respective chapters dedicated to architecture).

in a deep revision of architecture's formal frameworks and introducing a concept of a generative and relative vision of its formal repertoire. Critique itself became a generative principle of a practice increasingly detached from its own tradition and open to experimentation with new, original forms.

This approach, however, remained burdened by a "rationalist", logocentric perspective, still shaped by a Kantian bias toward classifying architecture through abstract principles, mostly borrowed from philosophy or logic; ultimately, it also highlighted the limits of a purely logical-metaphysical, text-based critique of the architectural phenomenon.

On the other hand, partly due to the perceived failure of previous approaches, neoformalist methodologies have developed, marked by a reductionist focus on architecture's figurative aspects. These approaches revived the figurative analysis of architecture, reinterpreted through a post-structuralist (deconstructivist) lens, seeking to center the focus on design and the search for its supposed immanent laws. Sometimes they anticipated and amplified the impact of new systems of representation and production introduced by computers, while also warning against uncontrolled formal proliferation, which often operates independently from the well-established interpretation of modern "tradition". This tradition is seen as an essential basis for any further development that aims to be more than an empty exercise of expressive freedom, detached from architectural tradition and bent solely to utilitarian logic, more typical in visual communication and industrial design.

Abstracted neoformalism finds its natural allies in the radical conceptual and formalist avantgardes, a constant trend in contemporary art, especially in relation to American minimalism and conceptual art. This movement recognizes in figure and its geometric relationships the true archetype of architecture, elevating it to a genetic *matrix* for its construction, asserting autonomy through internal compositional laws as its main *raison d'être*. Synchronic approach seeks to evade any diachronic contradictions inherent in contextual approaches, which inevitably require acknowledgment of specific historical and environmental realities.

A dichotomy is reintroduced – between realm of discourse and methodological critique, as analytically demonstrated by the 20<sup>th</sup> century epistemology, and the figurative realm, which claims its own autonomy, even to the extreme of legitimizing itself solely within mechanisms of production and reproduction. The great merit of

Italian architectural tradition consists in bridging these two realms: the diachronic plane, represented by context as both environment and typology, and the synchronic plane of form<sup>6</sup>. Environment and history are regarded as repositories of models that ground the project and its inherent values in reality, thus providing a fresh critical contribution to interpreting the present.

6. We still find it methodologically useful to distinguish, without resorting to a rigid dichotomy, between synchronic and diachronic aspects of the phenomena under observation: «Synchronic and diachronic. A science that operates on values, that is, on entities that are relational and intrinsically independent of natural laws, must approach research from two different perspectives: along the axis of simultaneity, which concerns the relationships between coexisting entities, and along the axis of succession, where entities from the first axis are placed in relation to their changes, that is, they are considered within a temporal dimension [...]. Therefore, a distinction must be made between synchronic linguistics, which studies the state conditions of a language, and diachronic linguistics, which deals with evolutionary phenomena» in M. Durante, *La linguistica sincronica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1975. In principle, composition lends itself to a synchronic and diagrammatic analysis, while typology and context are diachronic and evolutionary in nature.

## Free for all: a new Golden Age?

Thus the temporal aspect of architecture no longer resided in its dual nature of light and shadows, or in the aging of things; it rather presented itself as a catastrophic moment in which times taken things back. These thoughts have led me to the concept of identity, and the loss of it. Identity is something unique, typical, but is also a choice<sup>7</sup>.

Scanning the relationship between Eisenman and Derrida, we meet the concept of *chora*; that notion shows, via Heideggerian-inspired etymological maneuvers, the impossibility of language to articulate space through positive concepts, underscoring a systemic incomprehensibility between structures of thought and means of expression. Space, inaccessible to the narrative subject of *logos*, remains the unpredicated element of Western thought, as crystallized by Plato in the invariable term *chora*, which renders us exiles in the wide sea of spatial meaning... «A name that is neither proper nor common, signifying nothing, an impossible name of a faceless Other that is not any being “that is”, and “which cannot even be spoken of in the present because *chora* never appears as such”. It is an atypical space of limitless endurance, an unlocated and secret place»<sup>8</sup>.

After countless and negative statements, one would suspect that intentions are being attributed to Plato who never held them; his reticence or poetic ineffability in defining this concept might not stem from intentionality but rather from the implicit retroaction of Derrida's reading on the text's meaning, influenced by a Heideggerian removal of the Judeo-Christian tradition<sup>9</sup> (curiously, an undeconstructed subjectivity). In fact, this tradition is fully aware of *chora*'s meaning: the place *par excellence* is where people gather and sing in chorus or circle to celebrate their rites of belonging, a realm where the choreographic interaction between gesture, space, ritual and sound flow into the idea of community<sup>10</sup>, which is

7. In A. Rossi, *A scientific Autobiography*, MIT Cambridge Press, Cambridge 1984.

8. In S. Regazzoni, *Nel nome di Chōra*, Il Melangolo, Genoa 2008, p. 18 (FTBA).

9. Cf. J. Brodsky, *Fuga da Bisanzio*, Adelphi, Milan 1987; cf. Id., *Less than one: selected essays*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York 1986.

10. Cf. D. Borsa, *Identità del luogo e memoria dell'oggetto*, in VV. AA., D. Borsa (edited by), *Memoria, identità, luogo. Il progetto della memoria*, Maggioli Editore, Rimini 2012, pp. 35-53.

also, if not primarily, linguistic. We are faced with a space now inevitably filled with meaning and symbols, that is therefore fulfilled and saturated by own historical stratification, while for Plato, the situation was still “open” and uncertain<sup>11</sup>. Incidentally, I think that a similar issue applies to the concepts of time, substance and matter<sup>12</sup>.

We are placed in a theoretically awkward situation, especially from a secular perspective, though it does not lead to a proliferation and pollution of semantic aporias and ineffability; Paul Ricoeur has no difficulty to context the discourse<sup>13</sup>, once he adopts that “Judeo-Christian” coordinates within the logic of his task. Ricoeur’s choice to validate his argument within this tradition seems less contradictory and incoherent than pretending that such conditioning doesn’t exist. Derrida’s attempt<sup>14</sup>, following Heidegger, to provide us with a deconstructed sign – there is a mere trace, a ghost of our intentional desire for meaning, purified of that tradition (that is, freed from the ontologizing metaphysical feature of Western thought, centered on the patriarchal subject, etc.) – which functions as an antidote to Western onto-theology and finally is deconstructed and got free, would allow this *animula vagula blandula* to go beyond and transcend its limits and set out again on Hegel’s path of self-understanding as an individual plurality? Or has it served to decentralize and absolve the individual within a society increasingly prone to new authoritarian and control-driven fantasies mediated by the pervasiveness of digital technology?<sup>15</sup> And in this context, how can the autonomy of knowledge and the role of the architect be defended by the political implications of a skepticism that can easily lapse into populist indifference?

11. Cf. P. Zellini, *Discreto e continuo. Storia di un errore*, Adelphi, Milan 2022.

12. We refer to the fundamental pioneering study by Henri Bergson *Saggio sui dati immediati della coscienza and L’idea di luogo in Aristotele*, in H. Bergson, *Opere 1889-1896*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan 1986; also, cf. Id., *Materia e memoria*, Laterza, Bari 1967.

13. Cf. P. Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, Le Seuil, Paris 1975; Id., *Entre la mémoire et l’histoire*, in “Tr@nsitionline”, 22, 2002; VV. AA., D. Borsa (edited by), *Memoria, identità, luogo. Il progetto della memoria*, Maggioli Editore, Rimini 2012, pp. 21-32.

14. Cf. J. Derrida, *Les arts e l’espace: écrits et interventions sur l’architecture*, La Différence, Paris 2015.

15. Cf. P. Zellini, *La dittatura del calcolo*, Adelphi, Milan 2018.



## **An open question: the false prophecy of the deconstructionist advent**

[...] idéalisme et réalisme sont deux thèse également excessives [...] il est faux de réduire la matière à la représentation que nous en avons, faux aussi d'en faire une chose que produirait en nous des représentation mais qui serait d'une autre nature qu'elles. La matière, pour nous, est une ensemble d' "images". Et par "images" nous étendons une certaine existence qui est plus que ce que l'idéaliste appelle une représentation mais moins que ce que le réaliste appelle une chose, une existence située à mi-chemin entre la "chose" e la "représentation"<sup>16</sup>.

This aporetic attitude might still serve as a useful tool to extricate us from the clutches of historicism and evolutionism, or it may have become a blunt spear, destined to fall apart against the hierarchies of reality. The impulse to push into another, aporetic dimension may disguise an unspoken intention to merge "the order of place" with "the order of discourse", attempting to join space with a discourse that has been completely deconstructed – even if it means stretching the concept to extremes. What dangers lie within this huge, captivating notion of placing poetry and ontology on the same level? Following the siren call of the deconstructionists, skilled and enchanting, pushes us far beyond onto-theology, where we almost unwillingly dwell in a realm of pure poetics... from a tangible place to a metaphysical one.

With the tools of literary criticism, we can reasonably argue that the roots of this thought lie even deeper within that unspeakable realm of the very metaphysical tradition it intended to surpass. Derrida's claim to this anachronistic poetics – 20<sup>th</sup> century work to emancipation and the dismantling of the subject in its anarchic, defenseless solitude – is echoed not only in his essays on wide categories as politics, economics and society, but also in Michel Houellebecq's novels<sup>17</sup>, which more strongly depict France (and Europe of course...) as entirely deconstructed in its values and institutions<sup>18</sup>. We find that Derrida's argumentative effectiveness is

16. In H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1999, p. 1.

17. Cf. M. Houellebecq, *Soumission*, Flammarion, Paris 2015.

18. Cf. S. Regazzoni, *La decostruzione del politico*, Il Melangolo, Genoa 2006.

inversely proportional to his distance from the text itself, from the unique authorial idiom, which is the true heart of deconstructionist struggle, the core of Derrida's critical and philosophical intelligence. As he approaches society as a whole, he's more interested in textual practice (a sort of critical endless entertainment) than in operational pragmatics.

It is almost impossible to underestimate or relativize the impact that Heidegger's earlier decadent reactionary nihilism and Derrida's extreme late anarchist relativism had on architectural criticism. If the premises of this re-reading are reasonably valid, it is clear that the combined influence of these two hermeneutic tradition placed architectural criticism dangerously close to spiritualist irrationalism. Heidegger's decadent and symbolist imaginary and Derrida's dadaist and surrealist tendencies are not only pillars of European aesthetic tradition but also represent a shared commitment to transcending the limits of a dissatisfying reality. Yet this reality is the bourgeois, social-democratic, institutional framework that still reveals the reactive Nietzschean spirit of *Überwindung*, that unfortunately resurged in latest times. Considering the present contingency as merely accidental, this stance finds reality unsatisfactory on all levels, both in relation to an unreachable archetype and an inconceivable, and perhaps even absurd transcendence of technology – that is seen by reactionary thought as fundamentally antagonistic to the liberation of the individual subject.

Despite an anarchic period of expressive happiness and alignment between poetic exploration, critical reflection, and architectural research – considering the early seminal works by Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk, and Bernard Tschumi – this phase has, thanks to the benefit of hindsight, exhausted much of its *momentum*, while leaving behind remnants that we still struggle to fully digest and must be critically reconsidered. A new assessment is necessary to identify new strong starting points to reach the reconstruction of values, that is now more urgent than ever. Riccardo Canella offers an empathetic, emotionally resonant, and partisan point of view, yet one that is neither sectarian nor bigoted, sailing through all the critical phases of modern architecture's emancipation. His work suggests that the advent of a self-aware, critical modernity capable of addressing contemporary challenges may not have overcome, drowned in its own outmoded presumption and failures, but is still yet to arrive.

We are locked up between an “ethics of possibility” and an

“ethics of probability”<sup>19</sup>; as Latour famously stated, we may have “never truly been modern”<sup>20</sup> (and secular, I would add), bound to our superstitions and prejudices. The question remains alive before us: is “modernity”<sup>21</sup> still relevant? Just as alarming alternatives like irrationalism and mysticism emerge, perhaps it’s time to pursue modernity more earnestly than ever, better than ever, reminding ourselves that future is first and foremost a critically founded cultural perspective, that embraces memory<sup>22</sup> as living testimony for the future, rather than as a nostalgic *revival* of the past.

19. Cf. A. Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: essays on the Global Condition*, Verso, London 2013; Id., *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1996.

20. Cf. B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, in *Essai d'anthropologie simétrique*, La Découverte, Paris 1991.

21. F. Jameson writes: «Ontologies of the present demand archeologies of the future, not forecast of the past», in F. Jameson, *A singular modernity: essay on the ontology of the present*, Verso, London 2012, pp. 205 and following.

22. J.L. Cohen writes: “Here it is not so much a question of the city’s memory as of the immediate memory of architectural culture which, (in the French context), seems to me tragically absent [...]. [Architects] remain, however, incapable of producing the memory of their own culture. This neurosis of forgetting extends to the many sectors of the state apparatus that deal with architecture, such as education or heritage policy, and it seems to me one of the most serious symptoms of the crisis of architecture as a discipline and as a culture”, in Id., *La frattura tra architetti e intellettuali, ovvero gli insegnamenti dell’italofilia*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2024, pp. 34-35.

## *Preface*

### **A generational *compendium* of architectural composition**

In my generation, which is no longer so young, a recurring question arises: should we consider ourselves the last architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the first of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The scenario before us, globalized and worldized, seems entirely disproportionate to the concepts and tools provided to us as somewhat certain and secure during our education. How can we try to adapt them and make them effective in relation to a development (and not necessarily progress) that still appears entirely fluid?

In this scenario, will it become possible and credible to pursue a design research oriented towards knowledge, towards the deepening of the city and its articulation in architecture, as well as the rays of mutual influence along which time has exchanged cultures, from the Mediterranean to the Modern Movement? Will it be possible to derive from this contextualization a typification and a figuration of architecture capable of establishing an authoritative and credible dialogue at various levels of demand posed by today's mondialized society?

The following notes aim to offer a generational perspective on the current evolution of architectural composition, which presents numerous uncertainties and, consequently, numerous questions. These notes are stimulated by lectures given by various professors in the course on Theories and Techniques of Architectural Design, which I have attended since the establishment of the Faculty of Civil Architecture at the Politecnico di Milano-Bovisa in 1998.

These lectures primarily addressed the architecture of the Modern Movement, critically approached not with an objective and philological intent, as they were not delivered by historians, but with an interpretive and operational attitude, as they were mostly given by professors teaching in design studios.

In the course of these lectures, the definition formulated by Charles Baudelaire in 1863 has run through, whereby «modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable»<sup>1</sup>.

If it can be said to be valid for art in general, it appears particularly fitting for architecture, since architecture, unlike other arts, aims to satisfy practical needs present since the origins of humanity.

Cave and forest, shelter and transcendence, hut and temple, individual-family and community sphere constitute the dualism on which architecture develops over time, filtering the ideals that have inspired other arts through the material process and the purpose of construction. The topics of the lectures mostly concerned the works and architects of the Modern Movement. It seemed to me that the professors temporally encompassed it within the phase of its ideological and formal radicalization, beginning where Expressionism push to the extreme into *Sachlichkeit* (Fagus Factory in Alfeld, 1912, by Gropius) and concluding where the uncertain conceptual and formal boundary of Postmodernism lies, perhaps refraining (out of a deontological scruple) from expressing opinions, except through indirect allusions, on the final phase of notoriety reached by “event” architecture. The “event” architecture marked in Italy by the arrival of foreign authors for commissions and works, to which our architects also attempt to adapt, giving rise to a sort of “Italian comedy”<sup>2</sup>.

As for the Modern Movement, although without any ideological pretensions, I have adopted the same initial and concluding parenthesis, for the subsequent period, I had to extend to include certain attitudes and formal results that, today, prevail with some success among critics and the public opinion and with which our generation will inevitably have to contend.

Therefore, these notes are arranged as concerns for still open

1. In a C. Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, Le Figaro, Paris 1863 (FTBA).

2. Cf. M. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1987.

questions, and if answers are suggested here, they are proposed not with the presumption of offering solutions to the problems but only to contribute to the enrichment of the debate.

I have long reflected on finding a possible order to the numerous issues at stake until I tried to gather them, individualizing them for greater clarity, in the triad: place, theme, form, while knowing that the three categories are (and will be) closely interconnected and interdependent.

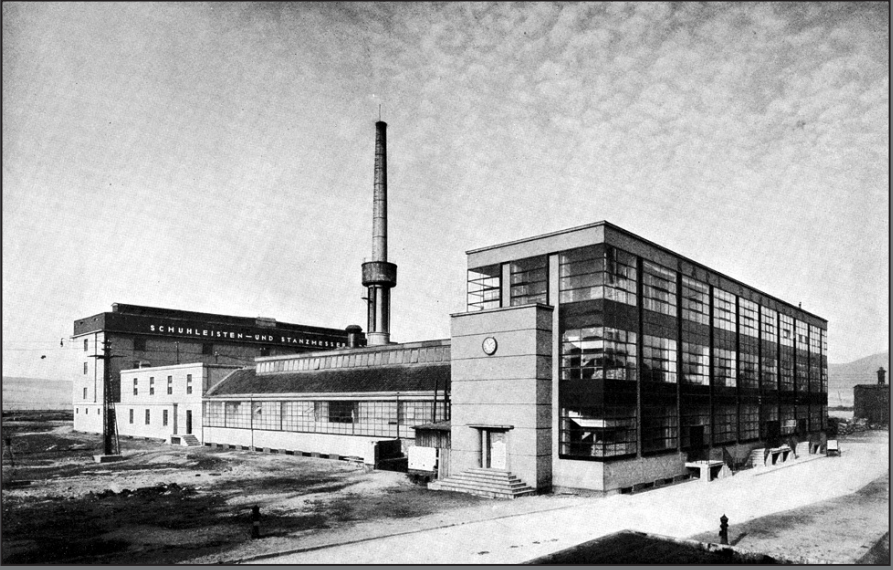


1.



2.

1. Charles Baudelaire, 1821-1867.
2. Charles Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, "Le Figaro", Paris 1863.
3. Walter Gropius, *Fagus Factory*, Alfeld-an-der-Leine, 1910-1911.



3.





**Place**



## The “universal” column by Loos

«The great Doric column will be built. If not in Chicago, in another city. If not for the “Chicago Tribune”, for some other newspaper. If not by me, then by another architect»<sup>1</sup>. With this statement, Adolf Loos concludes the text accompanying his project submitted in 1922 for the new headquarters of the “Chicago Tribune”. The author of *Ornament and Crime* here seems to contradict his own principles: first, due to the claim of ubiquity in the statement; second, due to the claim of the inadmissibility of symbolic evocation, which at the opening of the same text reads: «[...] to erect a monument that would be inseparably and forever tied to the concept of the city of Chicago, like St. Peter’s dome for Rome or the Leaning Tower for Pisa»<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, this is perhaps not the same person who, in 1910, had declared: «The path of civilization is a path away from ornamentation leading to the absence of ornament! Civil evolution is synonymous with the elimination of ornament from the object of use»<sup>3</sup>?

Beyond the aphoristic tone, sometimes pushed to the point of paradox, typical of Loos, the project for the Chicago Tribune appears deeply inspired by its intended location. This is indeed

1. In A. Loos, *Il concorso per la nuova sede della “Chicago Tribune”, 1922*, in *La civiltà Occidentale: “Das Andere” e altri scritti*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1981, pp. 155-156 (FTBA).

2. *Ivi*, p. 154.

3. In A. Loos, *Architettura*, 1910, in *Parole nel vuoto*, Adelphi, Milan 1972, p. 243 (FTBA).

that grand, frenetic, fantastic North American metropolis that Loos knew, having stayed there between 1893 and 1896, the year he visited the Chicago World's Fair, where in a shortened and accelerated time, which consumes the depth of history, symbols are pushed to the colossal. It is the perspective of a European intellectual, fascinated by those same futuristic contradictions, who looks at a new world and wants to be part of a different identity. Not unlike Franz Kafka who, despite not knowing America, wrote *Der Verschollene* in 1912 (published posthumously as *Amerika* in 1927)<sup>4</sup>, of which his most attentive biographer, Johannes Urzidil, says: «It is as if he had studied today's metropolis with the utmost attention, fifty years in advance»<sup>5</sup>.

4. Cf. F. Kafka, *Amerika*, Kurt Wolff Verlag, Munich 1927.

5. In J. Urzidil, *Kafka – Quella strana attrazione per tutto ciò che era America*, in “la Repubblica”, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2002, p. 32 (FTBA).

## Place of the *Pioneers* and place of the *Masters* of the Modern Movement

In Nikolaus Pevsner's 1936 text, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*<sup>6</sup>, the architects considered as such are primarily those born between 1855 and 1875 (chronologically: H.P. Berlage, V. Horta, H. Van de Velde, J.M. Olbrich, F.L. Wright, P. Behrens, C.R. Mackintosh, T. Garnier, H. Poelzig, J. Hoffmann, A. Loos, A. Perret). While it is evident that their personal poetics all paid attention to the destinations of their works (the *Cité Industrielle*, established in 1901-1904 by Garnier in a plausible yet unreal location near the Rhône River, is still as such), the only exception is Walter Gropius, who indeed belongs to the next generation being born in 1883, marking a new phase in architecture. The pioneers predominantly operated within a still compact city, substantially intact in its historical stratification, whereas Gropius' generation primarily worked outside the city, where nature and landscape were often contaminated by uncontrolled urban fringes, mostly for industrial, residential, and logistics-related purposes, demanding maximum economy and standardization. Their projects are thus inspired by the Taylorist factory (e.g., the Fagus Factory in Alfeld-an-der-Leine, 1910-1911) or what was defined at the 1929 CIAM in Frankfurt as the *Existenzminimum*, focusing on the functionality of popular housing, not considering any criterion of transplantation or evocation of the past. Yet, as soon as the means invested allow, even so-called "rationalist" architecture does not renounce considering the place, in a geographical or historical sense.

This can be seen, in the first case, in the villa and the suburban bourgeois house, where large glass surfaces filter the surrounding landscape; and, in the second case, in the building requiring a certain degree of representativeness, aspiring to measure itself with the great architecture of the past. It can be found, historically, in Le Corbusier's Palace of the Soviets, as it represents a constant vocation for him, beginning with the design of his 1911 Oriental journey at the age of twenty-four; and again in 1924, when he wrote: «*Et puis la Grèce. Puis le Sud de l'Italie avec Pompéi. Rome. J'ai vu les*

6. Cf. N. Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, Faber & Faber, London 1936.

*grands monuments éternels, gloire de l'esprit humain. J'ai surtout cédé à cette invincible attirance méditerranéenne*»<sup>7</sup>.

But it is also found, geographically, in Bruno Taut's *Alpine Architecture*, imagined and commented on in 1918; for example, when he dreams: «[...] glass cathedral in Portofino arcades open with alternating views of the open sea»<sup>8</sup>. And again in the historical sense when Paul Westheim, as early as 1927, was the first to consider Ludwig Mies van der Rohe «[...] one of the most gifted and original students of Schinkel»<sup>9</sup>. But, ultimately, what could rationalist architecture evoke, if not taken case by case, but as a whole and in all its extension? Probably, according to an interval not historical but almost contemporary, that deforming synthesis of reality adopted by avant-garde figurative art, invoked by architecture for the same functional and especially formal credibility of its objective process, but perhaps also to carve out a niche in a taste that resists both, except for a narrow intellectual circle that may suffice for the other figurative arts, but certainly not for the institutional task of architecture. Despite the controversies in Weimar in 1922, it is undeniable that Gropius and the Bauhaus owe much to Theo van Doesburg and De Stijl<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, despite the intention to surpass it in Purism<sup>11</sup>, it is undeniable that Le Corbusier owes much to Cubism. Edoardo Persico is aware of this when he postulates an Italian path to the Modern Movement inspired by Metaphysics<sup>12</sup>.

7. In Le Corbusier, *Confession*, 1925, in *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, Édition Vincent, Fréal & C.le, Paris 1959, p. 210.

8. In F. Borsi e G.K. Koenig, *Architettura dell'espressionismo*, Vitali e Ghianda, Genoa 1967, p. 266 (FTBA).

9. Cf. P. Westheim, *Mies van der Rohe: Entwicklung eines Architekten*, in "Das Kunstblatt", vol. 11, no. 2, 1927, pp. 55-62.

10. Cf. B. Zevi, *Poetica dell'architettura neoplasticista*, Tamburini, Milan 1953, p. 12; also, G.C. Argan, *Walter Gropius e la Bauhaus*, 1951, Einaudi, Turin 1957, p. 79.

11. Cf. A. Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, *Après le Cubisme*, Altamira, Paris 1918.

12. Cf. E. Persico, *Un teatro a Busto Arsizio*, in "Casabella", no. 90, 1935.