

Architectural Design and History

**Spaces of Memory.
Commentaries
on 21st Century
Buildings**

edited by Luigi Spinelli

FrancoAngeli

Informazioni per il lettore

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Architectural Design and History

The Bookseries *Architectural Design and History* intends to explore the relationships between architectural design and the contemporary city, with a particular focus on the contexts where urban transformations relate to the preservation and promotion of historical heritage. By intersecting various theories, techniques and practices, the contributions aim at unfolding the complex identity of the architectural culture, fostering connections and exchanges among different disciplines, and enhancing a strategical and evolutionary conception of architectural heritage.

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Editorial coordination
Elena Montanari

Graphic design
Tassinari/Vetta

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Memory Exercises

Luigi Spinelli

A book like this — an anthology of commentaries focused on the work of a selection of contemporary architects, belonging to the same generation, but educated in different geographic and cultural contexts — represents an opportunity to raise some questions about the relationship with the past.

How many variations can memory account for? And consequently, which interpretations of memory does contemporaneity offer?

Through the words of the following essays, at least four possible and practiced approaches emerge.

One possible answer is based on the use of memory in the construction of specific professional modalities, as if it was one of the many components that participate in the design process. This approach can be implemented with different attitudes. The discretion of Andrew Berman, the critical distance of Renzo Piano, the typological method of José Ignacio Linazasoro, the patient reflection of Paolo Zermani, the constructive idea of Alberto Campo Baeza, all seem to belong to this category.

Luca Cardani identifies two types of memory that can be detected in the work of Andrew Berman: the collective one, belonging to culture and to the understanding of places, and the personal one, pertaining to some architectural facts that guide the compositional work of the New York based architect, and intervening more or less unconsciously in this delicate process. In this intervention Cardani identifies an attitude of discretion, interpreted here as the capability of thought to judge with moderation and sense of measure. This attitude shows itself in simple architectural forms, characterized by calibrated relationships, which load spaces and places with meaning. In these terms, Berman's work outstands for the ability in giving a new character to the buildings, by modifying their interior spatiality through minor, controlled actions — spanning from partial additions or subtractions, to the transformation of single parts — that change the identity of the spaces.

Federico Bucci recounts two American stories, where the contexts of Renzo Piano's architecture are rooted in the memory of the protagonists. These episodes reveal the ability of the architect to maintain a critical distance in the design process, and thus to assign

memory with a role that is similar to the one played by design tools, and is particularly useful in measuring the value of the past without losing the capability to remain an observer of the present. The pragmatic work he develops, proceeding «piece by piece» — which is a codified aspect of his compositional attitude — is observed here in the expansion of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, an intelligent and fascinating interpretation of contemporary architectural domesticity, which has to be measured against the accumulation of European culture by American collectors. In parallel, in the expansion of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, technical and material solutions unanimously contribute to shape the spatiality of the exhibition machine, that displays history within the collection itself. The relationship with a philanthropic and passionate client such as Isabella Stewart Gardner, or the comparison with a master such as Louis Kahn, are directly connected to Piano's professional attitude. He perceives of and interprets the modularity of the proportions of the American architect through a refined play of references; rather than focusing on the legacy of his personal sign, Piano aims to answer these complex questions, through the international quality and reliability that distinguish his work, and that have conquered American patrons.

Conversely, the distance that connotes the attitude of José Ignacio Linazasoro places him in-between two antithetical approaches, the one focused on conservation and the other on compositional innovation. Linazasoro never backs up of engaging with the risks encompassed in the relationship with memory. As described by Renata Cristina Mazzantini, his rare attitude grounds on an equidistant position from classicism and the avant-garde and thus overcomes any distinction through the capability of weaving different values together. This ability builds on the method of the typological study, which is a solid basis for every design interpretation. Linazasoro's training, his bond with Aldo Rossi's analytical studies on urban fabrics, his understanding of ordinary construction, his passion and knowledge of the history of architecture, ground in the study of the typological process, where memory becomes a prerequisite for the design invention. The outcome of this attitude is a cultured method, that is particularly useful in the interventions on pre-existing architectures, and that is common to those who act drawing on the awareness of the distinct degrees of inter-

vention, i.e. of the distinctions between maintenance and exceptional transformations.

As critically analyzed by Massimo Ferrari, Paolo Zermani's projects show us a reflection on absolute values, interpreted with the patience of the observation practice and the related slowdown of time, that is a fundamental element in the study of history. The outcomes of this attitude can be observed starting from the first realized works, which he carried out through the collaboration with many masters (that characterize Zermani's path). These works show his profound bond with the fantastic landscape of his homeland, i.e. the Emilian agricultural countryside, in which he re-writes the liturgy of those architectures that establish the solid relationships with the place in a slower time; they highlight a rational coherence and a critical thinking skill, that coalesce in a firm approach to practice, resulting into a controlled lexicon made of solid, proportionate stereometric forms, sturdy volumes in baked clay and pedestals anchored by gravity, that seem to emerge from the earth, programmatically excluding lightness.

The reading of Alberto Campo Baeza's approach proposed by Emilio Faroldi is grounded on the understanding that, for the Spanish architect, architecture is a built idea. The thought and work of Campo Baeza both reside in the concept of tectonic «construction», interpreted as the foundational center of gravity and the final aspiration to which architecture must always address. This is a cohering point between the compositional moment and the constructive sphere – i.e. between intellectual and practical action – which in the architect's vision excludes a superficial idealistic approach or the entrusting to formal solutions provided by technique. Beside being an architect, Alberto Campo Baeza is a professional architect: the realization of his architectures allows him to develop a compositional theory. In line with the approach of the Madrid school, that focuses on the relationship between design theory and practice, as well as with the contemporary commitment on the fronts of professional experience, criticism and teaching, he appoints his architectures as a programmatic manifesto of architectural theory. He therefore fits the profile of a humanist architect, i.e. a cultured man who establishes a profound bond with the classical values and the memory of the archi-

tectural discipline and, at the same time, adopts a free interpretation of contemporary technical knowledge.

A second possible answer to the questions explored in this volume is provided by those contemporary architects who have studied and invented special narrative modalities, spanning from the more traditional ones to others that are particularly innovative, taking advantage from the enhancement of communication technologies and the interplay with different disciplines. I am referring here to Guido Canali's «staging», Pierre-Louis Faloci's narrative, and Philippe Prost's use of historical research.

As interpreted by Marco Borsotti, Guido Canali's method is rooted in the exhibition design tradition founded by the Italian masters during the 20th century. In particular it results from the intertwine between this inherited mastery, a functional efficiency and the formal elegance of its outcomes. In the rooms of the north wing of the *Palazzo della Pilotta* in Parma, in the *Museo del Duomo* in Milan, in the reuse project for the ancient hospital of *Santa Maria della Scala* in Siena and in the *Museo delle Statue Stele Lunigianesi* in Pontremoli, with his great sensitivity Guido Canali grasps the material essence of the historical places and animates them with a seemingly silent and essential language – although actually highly significant and characterized by aesthetic strictness. Fostered by the personal belief that «museums must be pleasant places where people might have fun», Canali pursues his own interpretation of what can be called a «staging of the exhibition». In this approach, each act enhances the unexpressed potential of the historical context by developing exhibit design solutions which enable the collections to interpret their context, hence manipulating the evocative power of what the architect himself defines as «semantic interpretation of exhibiting».

This is an alternative narrative method to the one developed by Pierre-Louis Faloci, whose practice can be recognized as part of a specific research line in which the memory of war events is inscribed into the public space through the valorization of the related disturbing legacies and material traces scattered throughout the European territory. This task results in the realization of new monuments and museums, based on local situations, which contribute to enhance both memory

and knowledge on the global sphere. Federico Bucci reminds us of how this contemporary chapter of museum design, which concerns precisely the display of «difficult memories», focuses on two fundamental aspects. On the one hand, this process entails a significant revision of traditional exhibition methods and tools; on the other, it draws on a renewal of their relationships with the places where these events took place, which are responsible for the conservation and the staging of the narration. In the research carried out by Faloci within this framework, a prominent role is played by the ability to build specific proposals aimed at enhancing peculiar places, and to develop a coherent disciplinary approach on the design of site-based museums.

Elisa Boeri examines some of the works by *Atelier d'Architecture Philippe Prost*, that has been frequently committed in the renovation of architectural pre-existences, especially those pertaining to the 18th and 19th centuries French industrial heritage, such as the *Hôtel de la Monnaie* – involving the hybridization of different functions in a still operative manufacture, where the workspace of 150 employees has been merged with new cultural, commercial and business activities – and on the *Cité des Électriciens* – a small settlement housing the miners' families in Bruay-la-Buissière, that was redeveloped through the addition of two museum spaces including the new *Centre d'interprétation*, and seven residential buildings. Together with the commemorative project of the «Ring of Memory» – the *Mémorial International Notre-Dame-de-Lorette* in Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, which is the latest episode strengthening the relationship Prost's work develops with the historic memory of the places –, these projects experiment with the theme of redevelopment with a coherent and profound sensitivity towards the memory of these specific sites and their inhabitants, based on a cultured and measured attitude, promoted by those who read history as one of the materials of the project. Drawing on a consistent historical research, the transformation of pre-existing sites is anticipated by a process of study and research on the specific site and on the local traditional building techniques.

A third approach to the contemporary interpretation of memory can be detected in the development of design practices based on the identification of specific themes related to a deeper understanding

of places; such themes are focused on the enhancement and characterization of a special attention towards the values they bear, which is turned into a work tool. The precision of Elisa Valero Ramos, the intuitive ability of João Luís Carrilho da Graça, Quintus Miller and Paola Maranta's forms of care, the attention to the habitability carried out by Ricardo Bak Gordon, all seem to refer to this category.

The writer's reading of Elisa Valero Ramos's work builds on her ability to redeem the constraints inevitably present in the events that lead to the realization of a project, by integrating in her solutions a logical appropriateness and an always essential sign, which is so precise as to become definitive. This attitude demonstrates self-confidence, a great capability in the management of the distribution layout of architectural spaces, and an ethical attention to the architect's role at the service of society. Valero Ramos operates on the quality of space with a remarkable precision, fostered by her particular sensitivity towards people's living areas, the main action field of which is the use of natural light, exercised through the ability to guide it technically by means of sophisticated control devices, and to expressly orient it in the relationship with surfaces and materials. In Elisa Valero Ramos' work, the theme of memory, expressed in the thorough understanding of the relationship between natural light and time, ensues from the coalescence of different experiences, including the sensitivity towards color, the recall of childhood spaces, and the daily contact with the city of Granada.

By adopting an empirical method, which in each context produces different outcomes, João Luís Carrilho da Graça selects the possible interpretations of the memory of the place according to the historical elements that it is important to conserve and exhibit in the contemporaneity. The inherent coherence of this method relies on the intuitive ability of the architect to sensitively recognize the past and present traces and to enhance them with a poetical vision. Barbara Bogoni analyzes the intuitive categories that orient this delicate design process. In the musealization of the ruins of the *Antiga Catedral de São Paulo* in Macau, they refer to the ability to enhance memory through a new interaction between the archaeological site and the visitor, based on the commemoration theme. The transformation of the *Mosteiro de Santa Maria de Flor da Rosa* in Crato is approached through the

juxtaposition theme, which enables the dialogue between history and contemporaneity. In the recovery and expansion of the *Convento de Jesús* in Setúbal, Carrilho adopts the comparative categories referred to imitation and grafting, which allow for the conversion of the whole monastic complex into an art museum. In the musealization of the archaeological site *Praça Nova do Castelo de São Jorge* in Lisbon, the reinterpretation of the past and the reconstruction of its memory are carried out through the formal intuition referred to delimitation and stratification.

Describing the architectures of Quintus Miller and Paola Maranta, Vittorio Longheu tells us about simple and useful forms, which time has sedimented in their work through continuous use and care, in response to the need to provide concrete answers to actual problems. This assiduous work, aware of the value of time and memory, tunes the architectural forms like a musical instrument to enhance their harmony with the surrounding environment. Miller and Maranta's conception of building is based on two fundamental questions. The first is a strong rooting of architecture to the place, and in particular to the Alpine geography and landscape, in which many of their works are inserted. The second is the recurrent use of the *repertoire* of history, from which they select typical formal elements with a general and eternal character, and implement them in the construction of an architecture representing the collective memory of a community. Their attitude makes the question concerning the search for modernity or stylistic originality superfluous; rather, their work exhibits a research on the analogy, applied to the interpretation of the context and the spirit of the place.

The design approach consistently adopted by Ricardo Bak Gordon results in the development of a work program addressed to the comfort of the users, and based on the measured proportioning of the inhabited spaces and the enhancement of their environmental quality. As explained by Christian Campanella, this attention to the capability of architectural spaces to house their users finds special applications when the architect intervenes in historical contexts, by applying the most appropriate representation tools. In the Dom Dinis Secondary School in Chelas he adds a new volume for complementary activities at the center of the pre-existing school complex:

it develops specific relationships with the surrounding buildings by adopting their alignments and colors, without renouncing its identity. In the *Piave Futura* competition project promoted by the University of Padua, the connection theme is enhanced through the experimentation with the urban arcades figure, adding further quality to the new construction and the related open spaces. Finally, in the project for the enhancement of the introverted space of the Roman Theater in Lisbon, the relationship between the monument and the surrounding city is improved with a simple change of role.

A further answer to the above-mentioned research questions can be found into innovative contemporary ways of interpreting memory, which build on the adoption of time and place as variables. The rewriting exercises by Tabuenca and Leache, the transfigurative opening of Tony Fretton and the obsessive questioning of Renato Rizzi, seem to belong to this category.

The adoption of the theme of the architectural palimpsest is present in many critical treatises on interventions in historical contexts; this practice focuses on the enhancement of the markedly physical or more sensibly intangible signs and materials of the past, which often remain more or less hidden in architectures and landscapes; although they overlap over time and apparently cover the previous phases, they remain buried but only rarely are definitively erased. Elena Montanari highlights the potential of this approach by analyzing the work of Fernando Tabuenca e Jesús Leache. By writing a new page in the life of the site, and ensuring the recognizability of the various stratifications, the multiple previous traces are made visible, allowing what had seemingly disappeared to reappear and coexist in space and time, and thus revealing the transformative process of the building. The rewriting interventions carried out by Tabuenca and Leache open up interesting and complex sides of the architectural practice as a continuous and incessant makeover, promoting a progressive vision in which past and present can coexist simultaneously, in the story of memory through the passage of time.

As interpreted by Angelo Lorenzi, Tony Fretton's work always shows surprising and unexpected aspects. His work on the conventional forms of architecture and on their communication is enriched

with slight sweeping and distortions that transfigure their characteristics, hence unfolding a variety of interpretations. In this sort of «magical realism», the elements of the compositional tradition (such as façades or windows) and of the domestic custom are connoted with special dimensions, and thus build a new and unexpected relationship between the interior and the exterior spaces of the house. Like several protagonists of contemporary English architecture, Tony Fretton looks at tradition and reinvents it starting from the materials of the history of architecture and art, with a particular affection for the tradition of Modern Movement, for the Smithsons' and James Stirling's work, so as for Louis Kahn and Álvaro Siza Vieira. The results of this research, which proceeds by abstraction and refinement of the compositional characters, are enigmatic and suspended architectures, that tackle our awareness about their familiarity and their reference to the urban landscape.

Claudia Tinazzi highlights how Renato Rizzi feels the urgency to restore the central role of architecture and its teaching within culture, and how he pursues this task by applying a rigorous method to the study of architectural discipline's reasons. This is a way of reading the history of places and questioning the shape of architecture through the projects, radiographing them through preparatory models based on vertical or horizontal sections, which help to clarify the sense and motivations of a certain architecture by simplifying and abstracting it. The places of Rizzi's interventions include the city where he was born, Rovereto, that almost unconsciously marked his thought and experience, the sites of his training, Venice and then New York, further expanded by the wide geography of his works. This query focused on the challenging pertaining to architectural disciplines is implemented not only «aloud» through architectural design, but also by writing and teaching activities, with a necessary obsession for this work and a coherence of thought.

The final «Socratic» dialogue between Álvaro Siza Vieira and Eduardo Souto de Moura – which took place in Porto on February 23, 2020 – tackles many of the topics unfolded in the previous essays, providing a prominent contribution to the debate on the methods and meanings of contemporary architectural exercises in historical contexts.

According to Siza, it is not possible to operate on the project site without the traces of the past: «there are measures», and there may be difficulties, but more often they are of help. And if there are not, they are invented. The architect's habit of consistently visiting the project site is mainly aimed at capturing its atmosphere, even if the work can start before the visit, based on an impression or a «mythical» vision of the place, as it happened with the idea of Pompeii in the project he carried out in Evora.

According to Souto de Moura, Siza's approach in the reconstruction of the Chiado district in Lisbon opens up the theme of *integration*, applied in urban morphology, in the construction systems, in the architectural elements, «which are not ancient, but which are the image of the ancient translated into a modern design». To the alternative proposed by Souto de Moura — between an attitude addressing Ruskin's vision, interpreting the ruin as an untouchable presence, and the other addressing Viollet-le-Duc's approach, which encompasses a *modus vivendi* and a modification of the building — Siza marries the position of Ruskin, although not in its total form: in the Chiado experience, the insertion of the modern underground infrastructure raised the question of tuning the static nature of history and the dynamism of an inhabited area. There is never a danger of imitation, because the transformation field includes unsolved problems to which a solution must be given. To conclude, as agreed by both architects, architecture is not a defined concept but a search for a goal, a sequence of experiences along a path that gradually unfolds them. Or rather, in the project, it is the meeting between the two.

The occasions unfolded by this volume ensue from a «blended family» effort. The authors pertain to the scientific community running the international master course in *Architectural Design and History* at the Mantova Campus of Politecnico di Milano, of which the book is a further research product. The selected works investigated by the authors refer to the many and etherogeneous protagonists of contemporary architecture who have lectured within the *MANTOVARCHITETTURA* program, which is organized in the most significant architectural spaces of the «Renaissance capital», activating them as memory incubators.



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