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MODERNITY AND TRADITION: 2 (TOO) STRANGE QUALITIES OF ARCHITECTURE

NOWOCZESNOŚĆ I TRADYCJA: 2 (ZA) DZIWNE CECHY ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Tradition and modernity, during the years, have been seen in different ways. In the past they represented a kind of “style”, when styles were a way to explain the history of art or architecture; at other times they represented different approaches for conceiving or designing architecture. But I prefer here to consider these terms as “qualities”, hoping that by doing so we will open a window on their secret. Like many other architectural qualities, they are difficult to be controlled or verified. Like many other qualities, you can only find very crude tools to measure their real level... and this can change over time; and what will change is the perception and consciousness that we have towards them. But contemporaneity is the moment we must live and where we act. When contemporaneity is self-designed thinking, or in the belief of thinking about the future, it is called modernity. When contemporaneity is self-designed thinking, or believing to consider its own history, it is called tradition.

Then life and architecture go ahead, changing the expected rules.

Keywords: timelessness in architecture, Neo-Architecture, contemporary language, Japanese Architecture, 20th century Design

Streszczenie

Na przestrzeni lat tradycja i nowoczesność były postrzegane na różne sposoby. W przeszłości stanowiły one rodzaj „stylu”, kiedy to style były sposobem wyjaśniania historii sztuki lub architektury; innymi razy reprezentowały one różne podejścia do tworzenia lub projektowania architektury. Wolę jednak postrzegać tutaj te pojęcia jako „cechy”, mając nadzieję, że dzięki temu odkryjemy ich tajemnicę. Jak wiele innych cech architektonicznych, są one trudne do skontrolowania lub zweryfikowania. Podobnie jak to ma miejsce w przypadku wielu innych cech, jesteśmy w stanie znaleźć jedynie bardzo prymitywne narzędzia do oceny ich rzeczywistego poziomu... a ten może zmieniać się wraz z upływem czasu; a tym, co się zmieni, jest ich postrzeganie i świadomość. Jednak to współczesność jest chwilą, w której przyszło nam żyć i w której działamy. Kiedy terażniejszość jest samodzielnie zaprojektowanym myśleniem lub wiarą w rozmyślanie o przyszłości, nazywa się ją nowoczesnością. Kiedy współczesność jest samodzielnie zaprojektowanym myśleniem lub wiarą w rozważanie swojej historii, nazywa się ją tradycją.

Wówczas życie i architektura idą naprzód, zmieniając przewidywane zasady.

Słowa kluczowe: ponadczasowość w architekturze, neo-architektura, język współczesny, architektura japońska, projektowanie XX wieku

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1. A FOREWORD

Tradition and *modernity*, during the years, have been seen in different ways. In the past they represented a kind of “style”, when styles were a way to explain the history of art or architecture; at other times they represented different approaches for conceiving or designing architecture. But here I prefer to consider these terms as “qualities”, hoping that by doing so we will open a window on their secret. Like many other architectural qualities, they are difficult to be controlled or verified. Like many other qualities, you can only find very crude tools to measure their real level... and this can change over time; and what will change is the perception and consciousness that we have towards them.

Then life and architecture go ahead, changing the expected rules.

Because when *tradition* becomes a style, it creates a new story, strong and with an identity; but a story that almost always gets fatigued with the same speed with which it was successful.

A lot of this kind of things happened in the 19th century.

Neo-Gothic, *neo-Renaissance*, *neo-classical*, then *neo-all*, which, precisely because its ability to reread so many different forms of the past, became a language more generally defined as *eclectic*...

Then came the modern, and, later, discovering the new modern didn't seem really an oxymoron (as it was); yet an entire period was declared as *post-modern*.

But after a *post*, there's always another post.

Then came the millennials, although it is not well known when they really began... and who they are... and it seems now that we are officially in the era of another post yet, beyond all, thinking to be ahead!

Now marketing and new media experts are sure to explain to you that: *the future is today!* which is a very beautiful and convincing image; but with a strange prerogative: it doesn't mean anything.

That's when we believe we can pontificate on everything, with the only basic information that we are completely unaware of what we are talking about... And here is the era of post-truth, where truth, perhaps because it is difficult to find, is considered a physical place: and that's when we went a little further, further on.

We can tell each other everything we want... if someone believes us, it means it's true! Everything, as long as it has no relation to reality: once it was called a *lie*, today it is called a *post truth!*

And common thinking defines it precisely through such kind of meanings.

As we read in fact on Wikipedia, which in the common belief represents the common thought (here the Italian pages):

*The term **post-verità** (post-truth in English), indicates the condition in which, in a discussion of a fact or news, truth is considered a matter of secondary importance.*

In post-truth, the news is perceived and accepted as true by the public on the basis of emotions and feelings, without any concrete analysis of the actual truthfulness of the facts told: in a discussion characterized by “post-truth”, objective facts – clearly established – are less influential in forming public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs.

The English pages are slightly different:

***Post-truth** is a philosophical and political concept that refers to “the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth” and the “circuitous slippage between facts or alt-*

facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth.” Post-truth discourse is often contrasted with the forms taken by scientific methods and inquiry. The term garnered widespread popularity, in the form of “post-truth politics”, in the period around the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the U.K. Brexit referendum. It was named Word of the Year in 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary where it is defined as “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

In both cases, a very nice and elegant way of explaining that: here there is nothing true...

But architecture is a living thing, and in which to live; it makes no sense to accept a post truth in this field too. Often even *pre-truths*, the oldest ones, are of great relevance.

2. ARCHITECTURE

The language of Classical architecture, which can often be confused with that of *tradition*, is not tradition.

The Classic is a language, a style; *tradition* is a quality, an attitude.

Much can teach us the Japanese adventure. And I would like to try to mention some of the most famous and well-known things, but only to extract a slightly new interpretation.

A friend of mine asked me, during a recent visit to some traditional places in Japan (but I myself was there for the first time and I didn't really have anything to teach): “don't you think that this ancient architecture is still very modern?” I told him that I didn't know how to answer; in fact, modern architecture (the one that was already so officially called) had already learned a lot from Japan, since its beginnings... maybe this ancient architecture was *already* modern (it is not *still* modern). Then the term time acquires a different meaning. Tradition and modernity perhaps indicate something different then.

F. L. Wright is well known for its relationship with the architectural and figurative culture of Japan. But for today's theme I would prefer to refer to other people, always important, but in some ways more didactic.

Japanese architecture, when explained, is always immediately connected to Chinese architecture. But that's not the case. The techniques are similar, but the architecture and the approach are very different.

It is very interesting to reread a well-known text by W. Gropius about Japanese architecture. The text is from 1960, Gropius speaks as a “master”, and as a master of rationality he *explains*, but he also realizes that there is much to learn from Japanese architecture.² Being a serious person, his treatment is perhaps a bit boring, compared to many of other architects, but it is very clear and beautiful.

You can see that two things make this “architectural space” and this world ancient and modern at the same time: his great timelessness or a-temporality, and also, but on this second point I tend personally to concentrate much more, the “behaviour” of a group, the way in which we confront things and the world.

² Here quoted from: *L'architettura in Giappone* by Walter Gropius, in: *Katsura. La Villa Imperiale*, edited by Virginia Ponciroli, Electa, Milano 2004. A translation from *Tradition and creation in Japanese Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1960.

Gropius talks about the privilege, for a mature person, of being able to travel the world and have the opportunity to compare what men do, trying to separate “the essential from the accidental”, which here could be just like recognizing the *traditional* from the *modern*.

I will mention him in an indirect way, since here I find myself translating into English a text that I found only in its Italian translation, and the consequences can also be very strange.



- III. 1. Katsura Imperial Villa, Kyoto, a pavilion
- III. 2. Traditional merchant house, Kyoto, a room
- III. 3. Nijo Castle, Kyoto, about 1630, the Audience Chamber. Here today – with good reason – it is not allowed to take photographs. For this reason I leave here only a sketch, that can serve as a quotation

In recent years he had the chance to cross oceans and continents, and he was able to observe the gradual transformation of many countries according to the models of modern industrialized society. It had not always been a rewarding experience.

Everywhere, the impact of the era of machines has created such a confusion that the disadvantages of modernization are much more evident than the benefits.

He says he felt deeply moved by these houses; because they represent a culture still alive, which in the past had already found the solution to many of our modern needs – simplicity, external-internal relationship, modular structure and, at the same time, variety of expression – and which possessed a common language-form, capable of unifying all the individual efforts; a culture based on craftsmanship, the same one that we are losing in the modern world.

It is therefore interesting to refer precisely to the residential buildings (rather than the famous temples), because they bear special witness to the most original characteristics of this aesthetic: no symmetry, lack of dominant axes, surprising effects and perpetual solicitation, subtly varied directions and everywhere an emphasis on the human measure, to which open and flexible plants are associated. The corridors and the spaces of the pathways tend to turn on the outside, surrounding the internal spaces, creating an intermediate space, both from the spatial and climatic point of view, the interiors can be opened on many sides, apparently always variable.

These are qualities that we could define as *a-temporal*, and that therefore *thanks to our new technical means could be exploited even better today than in the centuries characterized by artisanal production.*

Here Gropius mentions *timelessness* as an important quality, mentioning it almost in passing; but I think that that – if can be identified – it is the most important quality.

Remarkably if we compare the humble buildings with the elegant homes of the dominant classes of the past, we find substantially the same characteristics, only with greater degrees of refinement that meets a higher standard of living and more sophisticated. The most illustrious example of this democratic spirit is the imperial villa in Katsura near Kyoto, the construction of which began in 1620.

The result of a long evolution of a consolidated lifestyle, the architectural model of the Japanese home has become substantially immutable, so perfect as to induce architects to focus only on increasingly refined details.

The Japanese architecture of the past struck me (Gropius) to such an extent that, to their amazement – because they knew me as an indocile innovator and expected from me very different statements – I urged my Japanese colleagues not to abandon the great spirit of their tradition that I felt, and still feel, full of potential for modern life.

But it is of great impact also to see the great Shogun audience room at Kyoto's Nijo Castle: We can try to compare that to any throne or royal representative room in our world.

Here it is not the decoration of the ornament that counts, but the decorum, the position, the behaviour, the attitude, the symbolic: the symbolic position of a character in the space is what defines him. For us, until we get a closer look: we see only one man, crouched like another.

A concrete wall to hold the ground. But studied so that it becomes musk: the *tradition* lays in the behaviour... (Ill. 4.)

Tradition? Petals and leaves seem to fall as they should! The lawn is so important as the sky. The fallen petals mirror the volume of the tree above them, full of colour, but sparse in its branches so that it is filled with light. (Ill. 5.)

The great fullness of the void. Because *emptiness* is as important as *fullness*, perhaps more.



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- Ill. 4. Kiyomizu-Dera Temple, Kyoto, end of the eighth century. A retaining wall in a minor area. All is done so that the moss, “guardian of *tradition*”, could cover the surface
- Ill. 5. Jizo-in Temple Kyoto, Todai-ji Temple Nara. A Japanese garden, even the fallen petals and leaves seem to be in their proper order

Our relationship with *tradition* is sometimes more difficult to understand than we think. Let’s look at the most famous example of Japanese tradition, the one already mentioned by Gropius, then by all the others, including tourist guides.

One of the first examples of Japanese architecture is the sanctuary of Ise, the oldest temple of Shinto religion. The building, whose origins date back to legendary times, is linked to the history of the imperial court of Japan. To this day, the tradition of demolishing the sanctuary and rebuilding it completely every twenty years has survived, so that it is always in perfect conditions.

A very different way of thinking from our own and from that established by the many statutes of the conservation and restoration that we know.

But if we try to ask ourselves the question in a way different from the usual, we realize that there is not a real answer: is there more love for history and architecture, more respect for ancient things and memory, for the techniques and ancient ways of building, in taking care of and preserving as much as possible in time of an object as we received it, taking care of its wounds and maintenance at the highest level? Or are these same qualities better maintained in rebuilding it, completely, always over time, carefully repeating both anthropologically and architecturally, the techniques of ancient know-how?

I believe modestly that this is a question to which we cannot answer; even if in our hearts we know that the first solution (that of our tradition) in fact ensures a probably safer control compared to what it would be, for us, to venture into the second.

3. DESIGN

At the moment art no longer represents or embodies; but simply “is”, that is, there are no works, but installations.

That’s why they’re big, so they can be transmitted with selfies, who don’t admit small things.

Tradition or modernity?

But the first to do bigger things were as early on as 1964, and they were called *pop art* (Ill. 6).

If we visit what was once Gropius' studio at the Bauhaus, now well restored for its 100th anniversary, we also see objects of daily use in the little showcase (Ill. 7).



Ill. 6. Claes Oldenburg, *Saw (Hard version II)*, 1971, Stedelijk Museum Modern Art Amsterdam

Ill. 7. Bauhaus, a cabinet in the director's office, 2018

Ill. 8. Bauhaus pottery, Stedelijk Museum Modern Art Amsterdam

Ill. 9. Biedermeier, *Coffee Pot and Percolator*, 1818, Wien, Franz Köll

We find these also in major museums.

But we understand something more about the relationship between *tradition* and *modernity* even if we compare them with others.

The Ill. 8. shows us a teapot that can be referred to the Bauhaus. In the Ill. 9. instead we see a Biedermeier coffee pot. This is not only 100 years old like the previous one, but 200!

But is not less *modern*.

We don't know which possesses more *modernity* or more *tradition*!

We can see, once again, that there is always a *traditional* way, we can say, to seek the maximum of *modernity*, always exploiting the maximum of craft skills, i.e. techniques, of the moment.

The same applies to the Italian Design? Certainly, the most famous in the world... according by the Italians...

Examples?

Today these objects are called *icons*; they have reached this state because they have overcome time. Today they are remembered because they give us *emotions*, but then they were explained for the innovation of the image they represented, and for the technical and artisan quality, often innovative for the way a craftsmanship of great tradition knew how to interpret its new possibilities. The *novelty* appeared right where *tradition* made it possible!

How do we read design?

We see it in history as if it were timeless: that's true design. Today, the same object is explained in very different words from those used on the time it was designed.

Then, no one would have spoken of beauty. A good architect did not like to talk about the beauty of architecture, rather the term *good architecture* was then preferable.

If architecture is similar to life, the term was more correct. Today, the same people who talk about culture, rather than making it..., prefer to talk about beauty, as if it were the origin of things, a matter in itself, not an attribute of things, a field to draw on... and in fact no one knows what they are talking about anymore...

Try to see a page on Italian design: you can often find there the same things as 50 years ago... but the words have changed.

Magistretti also became famous, posthumously, for a mention in which he said that for him the word design was a *bad word*!

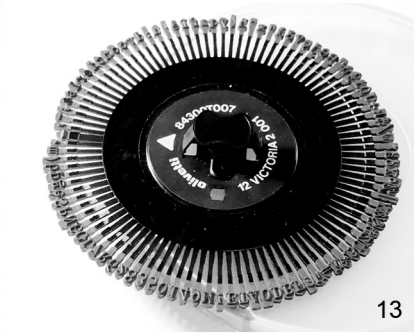
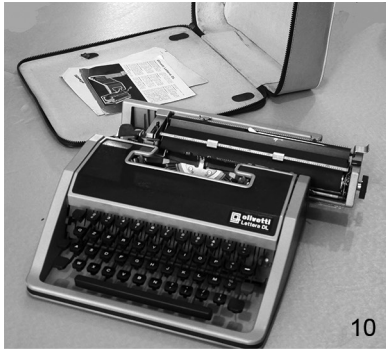
It's nice to see how words have changed if we want to interpret tradition and modernity.

Those objects were very modern, at the time. Those who really did things didn't talk about *doing*, or of *learning by doing*: doing was a natural thing for craftsmen and designers.

Modernity was about using one's own traditional skills in a new way, but no one would ever speak of creativity, or even of the task of *emotioning* (I translate this way the Italian verb *emozionare* constantly used today only as a transitive verb...).

The English words were not omnipresent forty years ago, they were not used as a weapon of communication and mass confusion. Design was still written in *cursive* (today it is called *italic* also in Italy, as it was not then), because it was a foreign term. Schools were beginning to include courses in "*progettazione artistica per l'industria*" (artistic design for industry), which were replacing old courses such as "*plastica ornamentale*" (ornamental modeling), old titles that still remained, derived from the old ways of preparing students for the applied arts.

In Italy English terms are today omnipresent; but certainly not out of linguistic necessity, but only to confuse people's ideas: when a manager, of any sort and level, technical, managerial, economic, communicatory or political, does not know what to do (basically, almost always), he will apparently change the world by changing all the words and replacing them with English terms.



- III.10. Typewriter Olivetti, LetteraDL About 1965 (like all the others, it always writes very well)
- III.11. Typewriter Olivetti Valentine, about 1969. Perhaps one of the best-known, always remembered in the color red. But was also beautiful for the poster, printed in relief, in plastic, as an artistic multiple
- III.12. Typewriter Olivetti ETcompact60, end of the 70's. These are still all like new and perfect, but they need very special tapes and spare parts
- III.13. The Daisy Wheel, Olivetti
- III.14. Portable calculating machine, Divisumma18, Olivetti 1973, Mario Bellini. Its skin is a distinctive color of yellow, made from a combination of injection-molded plastic and synthetic rubber. The edges were rounded, as if it were always carried under the arm, and the soft consistency of the keys, which added a vaguely erotic touch, was particularly appreciated. We know that the touch is among all the senses, the one that most combines the material with the immaterial. But it needed a special silver paper, and a battery: very difficult to be used today
- III.15. Vespa, Piaggio, 1946, Corradino d'Ascanio. *Globally local!* But we have to admit that in this image the object is of quite recent production, and could certainly not be considered a true *icon*

Hence I really believe that modernity and tradition are not really a language or a position concerning designing, but rather a behaviour, an attitude towards things and the world.

We can run through many possible famous examples, that can come to everyone's mind, and that many still have in their homes.

Here a small parade of typewriters that have passed one another on our desk in about twenty years (1970–1990). Then the desk tops were made of wood...

Some have lasted over time and still write. Others were even more special and of very high design, but were swept away by the speed with which the new machines replaced them. The newer ones must use writing tapes that are no longer found.

If you look on eBay – which is often wrong but certainly interesting – you will see that the typewriter certainly lighter, more portable and which now works even better, the LetteraDL, is the one that goes unnoticed, is the older and that is cheaper! And in all old objects, where there's a battery that makes them *portable*, there is also a battery (the same one) that makes it obsolete and unusable before it stops working.

And after these, how many fax machines and printers and other similar devices were thrown away long before stopping to work...

We remember some of them, when they represented an important image, when they were the sign of a moment, when they were the sign of a strong craftsmanship, when some communicative phenomenon made them present to us...

Every time we talk about architecture and design, we realize of how important is our way of facing the world and therefore the behaviour of the individual, or of a community, I remember a small piece of Brodski, which I tend to interpret every time in a positive way, even if always slightly different.

Nowadays, there exists a rather widely held view, postulating that in his work a writer, in particular a poet, should make use of the language of the street, the language of the crowd. For all its democratic appearance, and its palpable advantages for a writer, this assertion is quite absurd and represents an attempt to subordinate art, in this case, literature, to history. It is only if we have resolved that it is time for Homo sapiens to come to a halt in his development that literature should speak the language of the people. Otherwise, it is the people who should speak the language of literature. On the whole, every new aesthetic reality makes man's ethical reality more precise. For aesthetics is the mother of ethics; The categories of "good" and "bad" are, first and foremost, aesthetic ones, at least etymologically preceding the categories of "good" and "evil".

Josif Brodski, *Nobel lecture*, from *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1981–1990*, Editor-in-Charge Tore Frängsmyr, Editor Sture Allén, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore, 1993

In my opinion, to say that aesthetics is the mother of ethics is an indirect way of sustaining that what matters is precisely our attitude, our behaviour, hence the ways in which *tradition* and *modernity* will continue over time.

4. CONCLUSIONS

And finally, let's try to put at the end what is today always at the beginning, as a ringlet: *a nice quote*.

As you know today, especially in the field of communication and economics – which recently, since we talk about values "perceived" as more important than the real ones, now

seem to be coming out of the same research area – has come the habit of always finding interesting quotations in support of your own thinking. Then it happens, that from texts that the authors have never read and from volumes that no one knows, flow, extracted by various means, the most interesting quotations.

Following this *contemporary tradition*, here's one from an old diary (old in the nature of use, but at least updated in the year) that I don't know if it's true, but that I find plausible and interesting:

Here it is.

Man is a tool making animal... by B. Franklin.

That may be true. Or maybe it could have also been true in the recent past.

It was just like that; and it was the craftsmanship that allowed that special technical ability that was provided by *tradition*, that allowed us to always reach the *modern*.

We are losing that ability. And with this loss it seems that we are also losing the *tradition*, and from here, the *modern*. Only the *contemporary* has been left to us.

In the hardest moments we would pat ourselves on the forehead, thinking... well, it's me, I'm here, courage. Today is easier: let's take a nice selfie. We look at it: well, I'm still there. Is it me? No, I look even better! So at least the algorithm promised.

After all, a smartphone is a mirror, even if it reflects for a little longer time.

Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir un peu plus avant de renvoyer les images.

Or

Mirrors would do well to reflect a little more before sending back images by Jean Cocteau.

Snow White's stepmother queen's mirror didn't need this recommendation.

But today Snow White's story would have ended at the start, with no meaning. Which Queen or Witch would waste her time asking dangerous questions to the mirror, instead of taking a reassuring selfie?

If you take a look at Ill. 15, you see that with time, as they say today, the *local* has become *global*. The *Vespa* is red in colour, as it has more success in the Anglo-Saxon world, the *top girls* that surround it are of very traditional flavour, and of course, for reasons of privacy, the plate has been slightly corrected to make it not recognizable.

But if you want to work in architecture you can't just think about the *contemporary*.

Because contemporaneity is the moment we must live and where we act. When contemporaneity is self-designed thinking, or in the belief of thinking about the future, it is called modernity. When contemporaneity is self-designed thinking, or believing to consider its own history, it is called tradition.

To conclude, there remains only one advice, to be given to all of us: try to work with *tradition*, in order to achieve a timeless *modernity*, because this is the maximum we can aspire to, always trying not to fall into the *contemporary*, which is nothing more than a useless way of being out of date within a few hours...

All the all the images are by A Pratelli, except for ill. 9 which is from *Biedermeier*, volume quoted in the references.

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Author's note:

Worked since 1970, on the themes of architecture, in Bologna and in Udine Universities.

Full Professor since 1986, held courses on drawing and design in its various forms, on architectural design and art teaching. Active in the fields of architecture and design, interested in the world where problems – to reason in the old terms – can be solved analogically, through “shape” and figures. His research is oriented towards the analysis of the logic of building architecture, techniques for applied arts, and design as a language and form organizer.