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HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

HISTORIA I PROJEKTOWANIE ARCHITEKTONICZNE: ZŁOŻONA RELACJA

Abstract

Architecture is one of the most significant testimonies of human presence on Earth. For this reason, it is not simply “tied” to the past; it is history par excellence. Yet its interpretation is often entrusted to the forms or ideals it conveys. The language used to tell this story draws on art, sociology, and philosophy. This article aims to restore the complexity of the relationship between architecture and history, exploring the relations that architecture builds and modifies over time through three levels of historicity that interweave the process of architectural and urban design.

Keywords: architectural and urban design, history, place, architect, Vittorio Gregotti

Streszczenie

Architektura stanowi najistotniejsze świadectwo ludzkiej obecności na Ziemi. Z tego powodu nie jest jedynie „związana” z przeszłością – jest historią samą w sobie. Jej interpretacja opiera się jednak często na formach i ideach, które przekazuje. Język, za pomocą którego opowiada własną historię, czerpie ze sztuki, socjologii i filozofii. Celem artykułu jest przywrócenie relacji między architekturą a historią, jej pełnej złożoności poprzez analizę więzi, jakie architektura tworzy i przekształca w czasie, na trzech poziomach historyczności, które splatają się w procesie projektowania architektonicznego i urbanistycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: projektowanie architektoniczne i urbanistyczne, historia, miejsce, architekt, Vittorio Gregotti

INTRODUCTION

Every city possesses a historical and architectural heritage that represents its identity. Historical knowledge allows us to value this heritage and integrate it into new urban development, helping to create a sense of continuity and belonging between past and present – a crucial aspect of the complex relationship between the architect and architectural project. Giving importance to history in the design process of a building generates consciously conceived design choices, respectful of local identities and capable of contributing to overall urban quality.

Architectural and urban design represents a complex, multidisciplinary process that involves cultural, historical, social, technological, and environmental aspects. Among the disciplines that most contribute to a deep understanding of this process, the history of architecture plays a fundamental role. It enables the architect to understand the linguistic evolutions, construction techniques, cultural values, and social dynamics that have shaped the form and function of buildings over the centuries. In an urban context, this knowledge takes on even greater value, as it allows you to integrate historical and cultural elements into the contemporary fabric, promoting a relationship of continuity between past and present.

1. THE THREE LEVELS OF ARCHITECTURAL “HISTORICITY”

In 1966, Gregotti developed a definition of the relationship between history and project by identifying three distinct levels of “historicity” that converge in the project. Besides the history of architecture, he also identifies the history of the designer, i.e. the personal memories and the designer’s genealogical development, which constitute a kind of interpretative grid towards the world.¹

The history of the site on which a building must be erected is very important. If we think of the value of the terms “place” and “dwelling,” we know that every architecture can be considered a system of places formed by the articulation of spatial qualities. The spaces are all the voids that, in various forms and sizes, compose an architecture.

Here the meaning of “space” is what Heidegger defines as “an emptiness circumscribed by definite limits”, understanding a limit as what the ancient Greeks already defined as the point where something does not end but rather where its essence begins.

Heidegger thus defines the term *Raum*, space: what does this word *Raum*, space, indicate? It tells us its old meaning: *Raum*, *Rum* means a place made free for a settler’s establishment or for an encampment. A *Raum* is something liberated (*etwas Eingeräumtes*), and this within certain limits, what in Greek is called *péras*. The limit is not the point at which something ends but, as the Greeks knew, the starting point from which something begins its (*Wesen*). Space is essentially what is cleared, what is placed within its limits.²

Considering the well-known example of the “bridge”, it is evident to the German philosopher that everything that happens at the limits charges space itself with meaning, a space that otherwise would have no value. Heidegger proposes this relationship between the meanings of the words place and space: things that are places give rise to spaces, what is thus cleared (space) is successively allowed (*gestattet*) and arranged (*gefügt*), i.e., gathered by a place. Consequently, spaces receive their essence not from space but from places.³

From Heidegger’s existentialist concepts, we know that all places are defined by things that have particular properties and by an identity given by the relationships these things create with other things. Everything can be defined as a concentration or “gathering” of a world that represents its meaning. The things that constitute the “limits” of a place are those that confer upon it a particular value.

¹ See V. Gregotti, *Il territorio dell’architettura*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1966, pp. 101–119, and J. Rykwert, *Gregotti Associati*, Rizzoli, Milano 1995, p. 17.

² M. Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Verlag Günther Neske Pfullingen [1957] [in:] idem, *Saggi e discorsi*, Mursia, Milano 1976, p. 103.

³ *Ibidem*.

In the case of the architecture of a dwelling, the issue of possession that characterises the sense of ownership of the house is often linked to the baggage of memories that the individual retains of their personal experience of the intimacy of domestic space, even when they are far from their place of origin. Heidegger vividly describes this capacity to embrace in thought the entire distance that separates us from that place, even while we are here, we can be, relative to that “bridge” and to what it affords and opens, closer than someone who uses it daily as any other route.⁴

The philosopher’s definition of the sense of dwelling offers us the measure of how vast and varied the contents of this concept are. Its profound value in architecture – and not only in architecture – returns to the question of dwelling in a broader sense than that strictly connected to the house itself. Often the memory of one’s home provokes an association of images and spatial configurations of urban places, more or less physically close to it, enriching its memory and representing an extension of the house’s space.

Considering the relationship between human beings and the meanings of the words “space” and “place” in architecture, one of the foundational references is van Eyck’s note on the space-place dyad, within his famous definition of space and place. He states that whatever space and time signify, “place” and “occasion” signify more. Since space, in the image humans have of it, is the place and time is, in his imagination, the occasion.⁵ It is important to emphasise the perceptual and sensory aspect that characterises the relations between human beings, space, and place.

On the topic of space perception, there are many references from philosophical and psychological disciplines. In his *La poétique de l’espace*, Bachelard focuses on the poetics of the house when faced with the necessity to conduct a study of the “images” of intimacy. One of the questions posed by the philosopher concerns the association of ephemeral refuges and occasional shelters with our intimate *rêveries* of values.⁶ In other words, the image of the house seems to become the topography of our inner being. Bachelard identifies a series of imaginative values of the house that clarify the psychological aspect of the way humans inhabit space, their ability to perceive space, taking possession of one part rather than another, building virtual walls that exist only in their imagination, and favouring secluded corners and cherished niches.

2. ART AND SCIENCE IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

The field of architectural design is animated by the co-presence of two realms of action, both theoretical and empirical: artistic research and scientific research. On this question, Carlos Martí Aris proposes a hypothesis for overcoming this dialectic, drawing on the theoretical work of Karl Popper.

The common aspect of both activities lies in the choice of the epistemological method. Popper proposes the *Fälschungsmöglichkeit* theory by replacing the notion of perception with that of observation, i.e., a “planned and prepared perception”. This presupposes the existence of a hypothesis that guides the mental activity of a person, giving meaning to their observations. In scientific research, the power of critical imagination is decisive: every inquiry

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

⁵ See A. Van Eyck A. (1962) [in:] H. Hertzberger, *Lezioni di architettura*, Laterza, Roma 1996, p. 187.

⁶ See G. Bachelard, *La poetica dello spazio*, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari 1999, pp. 26–27.

originates from a problem that is confronted with a hypothesis through which the person seeks to envisage a solution.⁷ If, for a moment, we try to associate design research with scientific research, we can state that even during the elaboration of a project, the starting point is a problem to be solved and the next step is to formulate a hypothesis to find a solution.

Let us now seek to understand where the association between scientific research and artistic activity resides, and how it is possible to hypothesise abstract principles and universal laws through the analysis of a design process.

The world of architecture is made up of physical objects that are defined and specific because they respond to particular problems and needs, such as those that distinguish a place or a given functional programme, etc. In this sense, thinking only of its physicality and its condition as a specific product, architecture is more readily assimilated to a work of art than to a scientific product.

Returning to Popper's theory, during scientific research, observations and experiments have the task of verifying the validity of hypotheses; but unlike what happens with the inductive method, by using the "method of falsification" proposed by Popper, one can attempt to solve certain problems by formulating conjectures that are immediately subjected to critical discussion or experimental falsification, with the aim of eliminating possible errors or rejecting them globally if necessary. From this critical process arise new problems that will require new hypotheses and so on.

By using this method, scientific activity presents a substantial creative component because the results of such research do not derive directly from the mechanical manipulation of starting data, but from a subjective interpretation and a personal stance, on which the meanings and evaluation of data and observations are founded. From this point of view, it is possible to identify the modes of scientific research with those of artistic activity: the artist also develops a personal interpretation of reality, formulates a hypothesis, a conjecture, and their artistic product will express a precise form dictated by an internal, intelligible structure derived from the encounter between the artist's thought and the analysis of reality.

Having established the possibility of finding common components to the scientific and artistic processes, the question remains of how to overcome the problem of the specificity of the architectural product, in order to identify a procedure for generalising some moments of the design elaboration. That is, to understand how to fix certain guiding principles on the basis of the experimentation of a project, in a specific place.

To that end, we can again reflect on Martí Arís's considerations, which focus the issue on language, understood as the process of delimitation and filtering of the visible.

Language helps to extract the general from conditions and particular experiences. Apart from proper names, which denote a determined object, nouns always refer to a general idea that can always be recognised in particular cases, even very different from one another and endowed with their own individuality. Through the use of language, Martí Arís delineates three large "categories" of universal concepts for architecture: the elements or parts of the building, the formal relations between these elements or parts, architectural types.⁸

At this point, we can say that a design process can follow the methodological approach that Popper defines as the "method of testing and falsification." Hence, in the design process

⁷ See C. Martí Arís. *Le variazioni dell'identità. Il tipo in architettura*, CittàStudi Edizioni, Torino 1994, pp. 25–26.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 27–28.

of an architecture, the objective is to analyse the data of the various problems present on the site and in its history, and to formulate the intervention's hypotheses in order to seek compatible solutions.

3. ARCHITECTURE, HISTORY AND THE "SITING PRINCIPLE"

Architecture is a product of its era and its cultural context. Knowledge of the history of the geography of a place allows the designer to correctly interpret the meaning of certain forms and materials, facilitating a design that is coherent with the cultural characteristics of a site.

In 1985, Vittorio Gregotti⁹ asserts that writing and teaching architecture are indispensable ways to reflect on questions of theory and history that are foundational materials for the project. Before being professionals or artists, the architect is an intellectual. A very uncomfortable and difficult role, but one fundamental for practising architecture with some degree of sense. The profession must be carried out while always maintaining a critical distance and a vision as objective as possible.

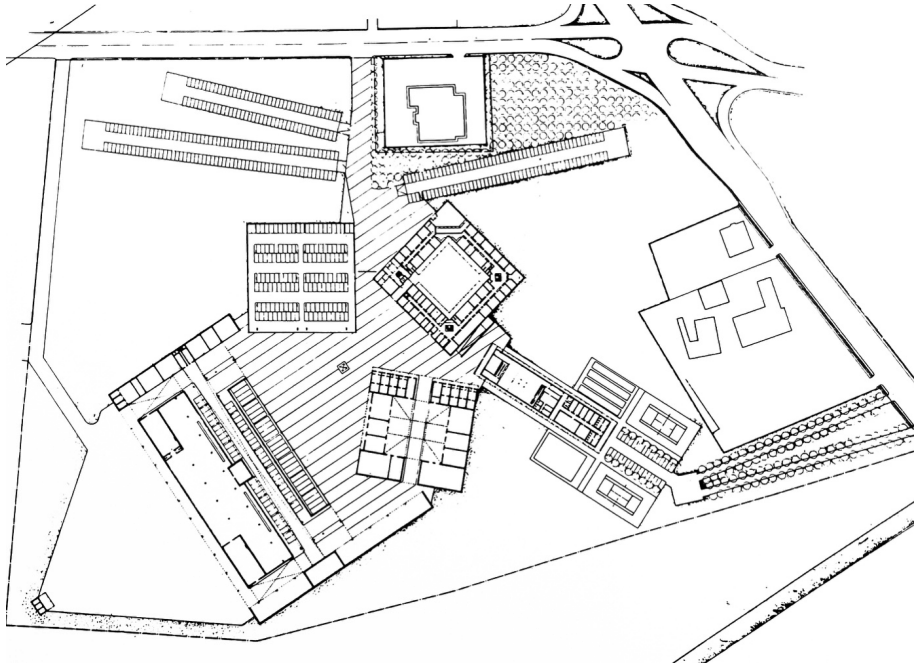
The "siting principle" is for Gregotti¹⁰ the bringing together of different facts through architectural design, the necessary relationship between condition and foundation. Architecture is therefore always the organisation (endowed with meaning) of materials arising from the problem and the site which remain within the construction even when their use and the site have completely changed. Architecture is the truth of the very essence of the idea of the construction which can be grasped only in the confrontation with the world of life.

The materials that come from a site and a specific problem must be subjected to critique, beginning with the critical distance that the designer applies to the historical moment in which they live. The quality of architecture lies, therefore, in describing that distance, by modifying the initial data of the project. This relation is necessary because it does justice to the result of the architectural project, safeguarding it from false folkloristic identities of regionalisms, or from the conservative internationalisms of powerful interests, or from techno-fantasies, mass behaviours, and poetic expressions. Doing justice does not mean "solving contradictions" but attributing meaning to them by contrasting the state of crisis of the current experience in which one acts with the very foundation of architecture and the related, continually changing conditions.

The notion of the "siting principle" is also intimately connected to anthropology, that is, to that complex system of relations between ways of living, religions, and myths, which governs in more or less visible ways the relations of social groups, history and traditions, influencing the morphologies of the construction and their way of contacting the ground, exorcising the violation of nature that the founding and development of a built core entail. The "siting principle" has to do with the geology of the ground and with its geography; it is a physical way of being of history.

⁹ See A. Mendini, *Colloquio con Vittorio Gregotti*, "Domus" 1985, no. 635, p. 1.

¹⁰ See V. Gregotti, *Nuova sede AMPS, Parma*, "Domus" 1996, no. 782, pp. 9–14.



Ill. 1. *New headquarters of the Municipal Company for Public Services (AMPS), Parma 1987–1993, Vittorio Gregotti. Source: reworking by O. Longo*

Regarding, for example, the project for AMPS's new Parma headquarters, Gregotti refers to the geometric characteristics of the Po Valley plain, with its agricultural presence, the marks of irrigation, the division of the land, linking these features to the foundational sense of the project.

From the history of the geography of a place, new architecture establishes a dialogue that begins with a building problem and arrives at a modification that is compatible. In this case, the project is surrounded only by cultivated countryside, so it was conceived in continuity with the Lombard farmstead's settlement tradition: a closed system around one or more central courtyards, low and continuous building, use of a single material, predominance of solids, etc.

The morphological criterion is therefore based on three main rules: the unity of material, the Padane brick that, given the building's modest height, is almost always structural in this case; the diverse forms of the buildings (offices, garage, warehouse, laboratory, canteen) that constitute the elements of the composition; the interconnection between parts with different typological identities, both to respond to a hierarchy of operations and to abolish fences and replace them with the same buildings, which in turn become elements of separation from the surrounding countryside. Each building has a form and details set according to four principles: simplicity, order, organic quality, and precision.

Gregotti stresses the difference in meaning between the terms "simplicity" and "simplification," clarifying that architecture is not simple and can only achieve this result through the complex elaboration of the project.

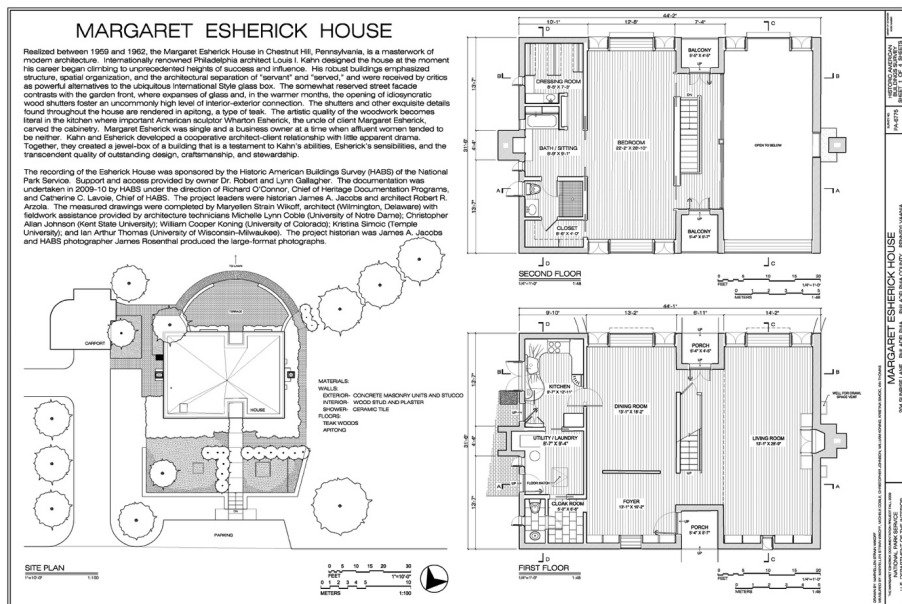
The term "precision" refers instead to the condition that for every architecture one must construct specific rules, according to a determined order of modification of the existing and

of the discipline's tradition. Each part of the architecture must therefore be coherent with these rules, and the whole must be conceived with the greatest possible economy of technical and expressive means, with no excess residues. The order, in this case, is the very structure of things, which in turn results from the interaction of many overlapping orders. In the project, the order consists in the selection and organisation of the parts that constitute it, but also in the new system of meanings it proposes, through which one can look at and reorganise the world in a new way.

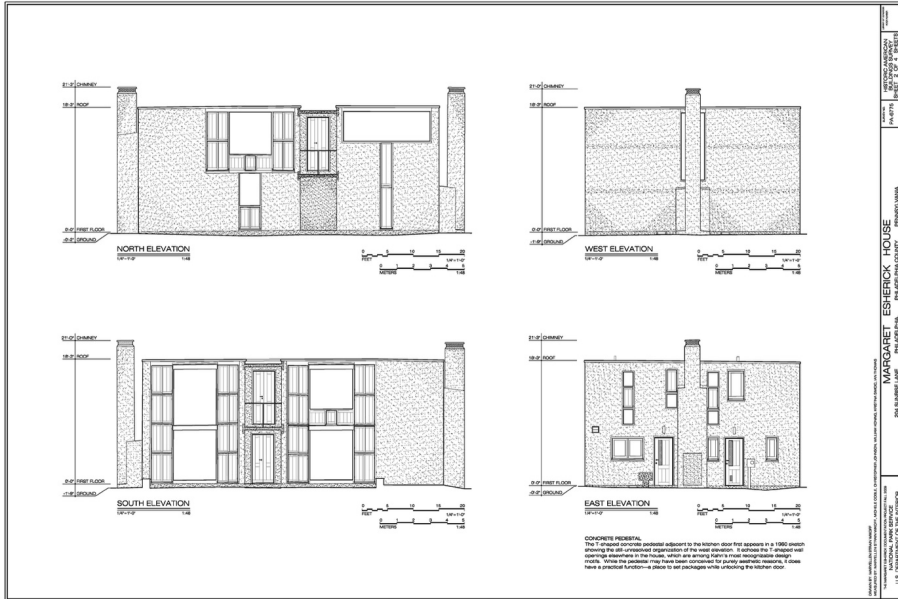
In architecture, the words “order” and “form”, used by Louis Kahn, evoke one of the most frightening phantoms of the contemporary world: the loss of identity through uniformity. The latter has been the result of the mass-society structure of the last century, but the most naïve way to escape this phantom is precisely the search for a “different” thing, an artificial, a non-necessary thing. Indeed, many whimsically different things produce exactly the indistinct noise of uniformity.

The rule that comes from order is the opposite of repetition; it is what allows rhythm to establish itself, what makes the identity of the design idea physical and visible. In this case, the “idea” is understood in its original Greek sense of the “visible form” of things, hence the project is what makes things “visible,” i.e., gives them meaning.

If one wishes to protect architecture from the vulgar pluralism of trends and from the homogenisation of the masses, it is necessary to reconcile both the metaphysical interference of different languages and the empirical conditions of a place, to which one seeks to give valid future-oriented answers.



Ill. 2. *Margaret Esherick House*, Philadelphia 1961, Louis I. Kahn, source: *Title sheet and floor plans – Margaret Esherick House, 204 Sunrise Lane, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, PA* [in:] Wikimedia Commons, Wikoff, MaryEllen Strain, creator, US Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=34386708> (access: 1.10.2025)



Ill. 3. *Margaret Esherick House*, Philadelphia 1961, Louis I. Khan, source: *Title sheet and floor plans – Margaret Esherick House, 204 Sunrise Lane, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, PA* [in:] Wikimedia Commons, Wikoff, MaryEllen Strain, creator, US Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=34386708> (access: 1.10.2025)

CONCLUSIONS

The history of architecture represents an indispensable resource in the process of architectural and urban design within an urban context. It provides tools to interpret, respect, and enhance historical heritage, favouring interventions that are coherent with local identity and capable of integrating innovation and tradition. In an era of rapid social and technological change, historical knowledge allows for a consciously built relationship between past and present.

The term “anthropogeography” enjoyed wide use in architectural culture in the 1960s when Gregotti employed it in his book *Il territorio dell'architettura* (1966). It has been used by Frampton for the landscape questions that influence urban design in the contemporary city. The term denotes a territorial context in which the city can be considered as a complex system made up of anthropic elements and others characterised by a natural order.

The intertwining of the three levels of historicity described above characterises a conscious design practice firmly anchored in context. The first level is the history of architecture, which offers the designer a plural grammar of linguistic, technical, and value-based evolutions useful for reading the present without being imprisoned by the myth of absolute novelty. The second level is the designer’s own history, understood as a system of personal memories and professional biographies that feed an interpretation of the world and a critical capacity in the comparison between local identity and transformation projects. The third level concerns the site history, i.e., the place as a set of spaces, boundaries, and geographical,

cultural, and social memories: a “geography” that orients the form, materials, and function of buildings within a logic of continuity, with respect to local scale.

This triple dimension finds an operational synthesis in the concept of the “siting principle”, which Gregotti proposes as a mediation between the historical condition and the design foundation. Architecture conceived in this way does not merely respond to functional needs but organises the site data into a discourse of meaning, avoiding both folkloristic derivations and excessive technicism. Order, far from being mere linearity, is the structure of relationships between parts and between languages, and invites a practice that values coherent diversity, the visible form as the incarnation of content, and critical learning through the elaboration of specific rules for each context.

The contribution of philosophy and perception sciences, from Heidegger to Bachelard, via van Eyck, and the Popperian operational conception, adds a methodological dimension: designing is a process of hypothesis, testing, and revision, in which imaginative creativity dialogues with historical and geographical data. In conclusion, the quality of architecture lies in the ability to build with rigour and freedom. Always anchored to the real anthropological, geological, and historical context in which it is born, it must be determined by precise rules, by a revealing language of the invisible, and by an ethical sensibility that defends the place’s identity against temporary, ephemeral fashions.

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