

MINGLINGS. THE PROJECT ADVENTURE IN REALITY ACTION FIELD

PRZEMIESZANIA. PRZYGODA PROJEKTOWA NA RZECZYWISTYM POLU DZIAŁANIA

Abstract

Modern is the mingling in which past and present preserve their apparent quality of strangers within a common continuity of culture and research. This essay investigates the mingling – as a tradition of research and method of work – starting from Mikrokosmos (Béla Bartók, 1926–39) and deepening it through the Appartement Beistegui (Le Corbusier, 1929–31). In both, the choice of the fragment, its clarification, the combination with other parts through the use of empty intervals, refers to the composition of figures. By the poetic manipulation and mingling of apparently irreconcilable pieces, clearly belonging to different times, these figures appear fertile to experiment with the problems of architecture today, in the reality as field of project action. The search for new spatialities within the margins of the already given is tantamount to linking oneself to reality, accepting it as a fact connate by the commingling, tolerating “the alchemies” to overcome the “No!” and taking “part of the risks of life”.

Keywords: mingling, tradition, modernity, dialectic, dyscrasia

Streszczenie

Nowoczesność to mieszanina, w której przeszłość i terażniejszość zachowują pozorną obcość w ramach wspólnej ciągłości kultury i badań naukowych. Niniejszy esej bada proces mieszania się – jako tradycję badań naukowych i metod pracy – zaczynając od Mikrokosmosu (Béla Bartók, 1926–39), a pogłębiając o Appartement Beistegui (Le Corbusier, 1929–31). W obu przypadkach wybór fragmentu, jego doprecyzowanie, połączenie z innymi elementami poprzez zastosowanie pustych odstępów odnosi się do kompozycji brył. Poprzez poetycką manipulację i mieszanie pozornie niemożliwych do pogodzenia elementów, wyraźnie należących do różnych czasów, bryły te wydają się sprzyjać eksperymentowaniu ze współczesnymi zagadnieniami architektury na rzeczywistym polu działania projektowego. Poszukiwanie nowych przestrzenności na marginesie tego, co już istnieje, jest równoznaczne z wiązaniem się z rzeczywistością, akceptowaniem jej jako naturalnego faktu przez przemieszanie, tolerowanie „alchemii”, by przewyciężyć „Nie!” i branie „udziału w ryzyku życiowym”.

Słowa kluczowe: przemieszanie, tradycja, nowoczesność, dialektyka, dyskrazja

1. FIGURES

Between 1926 and 1939 Béla Bartók composes Mikrokosmos, 153 progressive pieces for young pianists. In the same years, between 1929 and 1931, Le Corbusier designs a modern vertical extension at 136 Avenue des Champs Elysées for the art collector Charles de Beistegui.

Both works can be read as a mingling of heterogeneous parts.

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Mingling (Latin *Commixtiōnem*: mix together) means mixture, composition, the result of the confluence of several different elements into a single whole. In chemistry it is the set of multiple components without substantial alteration of the individual parts; a composition in which the individual pieces remain recognizable. The parts we recognize mingled together, in *Mikrokosmos* as well as in the *Appartement Beistegui*, belong to different times; simplifying, they are “traditional” and “modern” fragments.

Traditional is what follows or respects the tradition (Latin *Trādere*: delivering beyond), what is transmitted from age to age and recognized as such. Modern (Latin *Modèrnus*: just now, to the present, which holds to *mòdus*, measure, limit, term, within the limits of the present time and indicates belonging to the *hodiernus*, today) denotes what is of our time, of our days.

In *Bartok* the fragments of classical motifs, of popular songs, of modern rhythms, are selected, discomposed, mingled and recomposed into significant new structures. The sound masses are artistically and constructively structured in figures where the individual parts are recognizable. The materials cross, juxtapose or overlap. They establish ever-changing relationships between the different components of the whole, which thus undergoes substantial changes over time. When listening, the differences emerge clearly. One has the impression of witnessing a dialogue, a narration of a story, a meeting of times in space.

This way of composing originates in the study of folkloristic and popular tradition and in a musical “materialism” – at the base of the subsequent research of Iannis Xenakis – which has its roots in the ancient Greek thought, as a source of inspiration and as a tradition of research. It is a research, not a mere repetition of a “style” or monotonous application of “rules”, but a “happy sharpness” [Focillon, 2002] where the mingling becomes a method of work.

The choice of the fragment, its clarification, the combination with other parts through the use of empty intervals, refers to the composition of figures. The figure is a synthetic image that stands beyond form and function. As in some paintings by Alberto Burri, the figures of which we speak are composed by the poetic manipulation and mingling of apparently irreconcilable pieces, clearly belonging to different times, put in reciprocal tension to give meaning and depth to changing spaces. These figures of the composition are fertile because show us that there is a no real opposition between the traditional and the modern. Modern is the mingling in which past and present preserve their apparent quality of strangers within a common continuity of culture and research.

2. STRATA

The *Appartement Beistegui* represents a synchronic scenario of the method just outlined. Despite being one of Le Corbusier’s lesser-known works, it marks a different sensibility; a feeling that seems to contradict that rationalism understood as a “style” of which Le Corbusier was considered an absolute spokesperson.

The history of this project is known [Berg van den, 2015]. In 1929 the architects Gabriel Guevrekian, André Lurçart and Le Corbusier with Pierre Jeanneret are invited by Charles de Beistegui to submit a proposal for the apartment. For the client the aim is to have a place that “is not destined to be inhabited, but to serve as a setting for large parties”, a modern “machine à amuser” [Berg van den, 2015] where to entertain Parisian café society with events worthy of the Grand Siècle. For Le Corbusier, the main interest concerns the possibility that this project may represent a solution to the more general theme of the “roofs of Paris”: a new stratus on



Ill. 1. Le Corbusier, *Appartement de M. Charles de Beistegui*, Paris, France, 1929–31, Source: Fondation Le Corbusier

the city, verified in a specific place through the construction of “a completely new structure on top of an old building” [Le Corbusier, 1947].

The original *hôtel particulier* (Charles Jacques Gondoin, 1880) responds to the late 19th-century palace canons: a street block, with a back garden on Rue de Balzac, base in square ashlar, regular windows framed in neoclassical style, top defined by a decorated balustrade. The first extension (Louis Henri Georges Scellier de Gisors, 1890) takes place in the garden with a new neoclassical base/volume surmounted by a steel and glass winter garden. The subsequent transformation into a fashion store (Léon Fagnen and René Bétourné, 1922) introduces the opening of large porticoes on the ground floor and an extension, to saturation of the building curtain, in perfect stylistic continuity; the original garden is replaced by a laboratory and office spaces. A few years later, the main building on the Champs-Élysées is vertically extended by two levels and an attic. The new levels



Ill. 2. Le Corbusier, *Appartement de M. Charles de Beistegui*, Paris, France, 1929–31. The open-air room, Source: *Oeuvre complète*, Vol. 2, 1929–1934

are set back, with perimeter terraces bordered by balustrades, to respond to the hygienic rule that requires the withdrawal of the new parts built above the eaves line of an existing building. Even this progressive zigurat development uses homogeneous figurative and constructive principles, leaving only to the volume misalignments the possibility to read the building transformations.

Le Corbusier replaces the existing attic with a completely new space. The only photo of the ensemble we know shows the juxtaposition of white volumes, cut by large full-height openings, on a historical basis or similar to a historical pre-existence. The result is an unmistakably modern whole, not falsified with the mimicry of a false-historic. The component parts of the new architectural ensemble are clearly recognizable and the new “stratification” is declared as a constructive condition and as a relational structure between the different parts and with the city.

3. TIMES

The traditional rule of retreating from the existing eaves line is translated by Le Corbusier in the possibility of composing with the figures of the “garden” and the “fence” a succession of terraces arranged on several levels. As explained in the *Architecte* magazine, which publishes the project in 1931, the houssmanian formal constraint becomes the pretext for the construction of “an architectural landscape, both internal and external, created on different plans established at four successive levels” [Le Corbusier, 1932]. The first terrace “is a green space with stone slabs, enclosed by boxwood and yew walls” [Le Corbusier, 1932] electronically maneuverable; similarly, the second “esplanade” is defined by mobile walls of ivy and yew, suitable to open or close the visible space them too. In the last terrace, corresponding to the stair block and elevators that connect the attic with the building below, the walls a little higher than a normal parapet define the limits of an open-air room with a grass floor.

Compared to the strongly characterized context, the choice of the historical fragments to be shared in the architectural space is made according to the reasons internal to the project. “From this belvedere, Paris is visible in all its horizons: both in the most admirable places and in the dark desert of the roofs and the chimneys. The choice was to suppress that panoramic view and to create another architectural center of stones, gardens, and sky, completely isolated from the turbulence of the panorama” [Le Corbusier, 1923]. The characteristic “fatti urbani” – “the Arc de Triomphe, the Tour Eiffel, the Sacré-Coeur and finally the green mass that extends from the Champs-Élysées through the Tuileries to Notre-Dame – are compositionally abstract, i.e. extracted from the everyday environment and framed by the new architectural space in a synchronous dimension of time. In this way, in the modern mingling, the present has a dialectical relationship (Greek: *dià-legein*: speaking through, gathering; and *tèchne*, the art of making dialogue, of gathering together) with the past and does so using the instruments of compositional interaction between discontinuous elements, collected together while remaining multiple on the sensitive level.

According to a relational approach rooted in the history of architecture and city, the pieces of the “historical pre-existences” become mnemonic signals, vital parts of the composition, essential fragments of the space whose modernity is made intelligible by the relationships established between different times. What is brought to light is a dialogical founding continuity of the project: to become modern by throwing forward the terms of a comparison.

4. GAPS

In the photos of the *Appartement Beistegui* published in the *Oeuvre Complete* we find some other presences, enigmatic associations that challenge us. They are apparently decorative elements, pieces of a stylistic repertoire related more to the imagination of the client than to the lecorbuserian architectural vocabulary. Among these a fireplace – where “the owner of the place, following the evident imprint of a mode ravissante, has added a square of a Spanish fireplace in Louis XV style” [Le Corbusier, 1932] – a few pairs of decorated chairs, lamps, large vases and crystal chandeliers, hedges and small trees carefully pruned according to the figures of the formal French garden. These are fragments of a family reality, signs of the French Baroque and Rococo tradition, discontinuous elements re-signified “in the context of a world opened up by the main theme” [Vesely, 1996]: their role is that of characters inter-



Ill. 3. Le Corbusier, *Appartement de M. Charles de Beistegui*, Paris, France, 1929–31. The open-air room and the interior spaces in 1936, Source: *Plaisir de France*, 18 Mars 1936

acting with and on the scene, markers of a theatrical space. These objects tell us about the mingling between the realized work and life in which the multiple is a connatural fact, of the continuous transformation of the designed space into a sedimented space by those who live there.

In March 1936, the magazine *Plaisir de France* revealed for the first time the interiors of the living room, the dining room, the library, in which numerous objects and furnishings settled. On the open-air room grass carpet we find a *troumeau*, an oval mirror above the fireplace, armchairs, crystals, Venetian Moors. The appropriation of the architectural space by its owner has resulted in a real combinatorial “fantasy”, an eclectic, total and totalizing “*Capriccio*”.

If for Roger Baschet, the eccentric Charles de Beistegui can be considered “essentially modern” [Baschet, 1936] for his combination of eras, the mingling that embraces life in the *Appartement Beistegui* questions us on the *dyscrasia* (Greek *Dyskrasía*: bad mix, gap), i.e.

on the discordant meanings attributed to the term tradition. Often, in the common imagination, tradition does not refer to the relationship with history or memory, but to the sense of “atmosphere”, “character”, intrinsic narrativity. It thus comes to coincide with a “style” of ahistorical and therefore contemporary value.

The irreverent photos published in the 1930s (*Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, *Plaisir de France*, etc.) are certainly far from what Le Corbusier imagined. However, if we review them with the softened look typical of those who look at things, or people, on whom life and time have sedimented, we can see the transposition of the just outlined latent rivalry – which cannot be liquidated as a simple formal or aesthetic question – in a “positive conflict”.

“The metamorphosis of the figures does not alter the data of life, but generates a new life” [Focillon, 2002], a new dimension of space. In the perennial reversal between figure and background, the Le Corbusier’s architectural space continues to build the relationships between the parts and of these parts with the whole, guaranteeing their legibility. Like the red color used by Henri Matisse in the *chambres rouges* (1908–1909), this space is at the same time the figure and the void that welcomes the multiple, the mingling, the total sedimentation of life in the work, activating eloquent links between distant realities that nevertheless share a common latent world, which is “where our imagination and its organizational power has its source” [Vesely, 1996].

5. LINKS

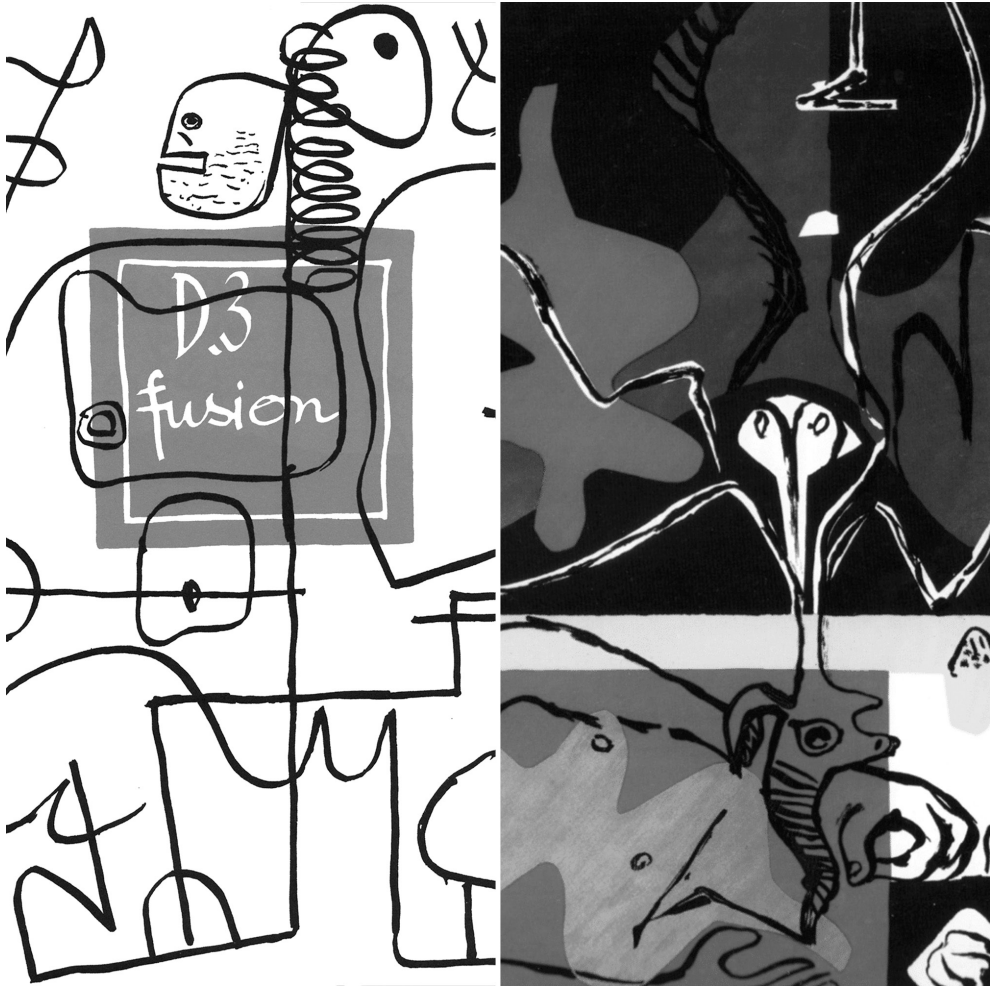
The centrality of the relational question, the importance of a dialectical process, the search in a way to compose heterogeneity without a priori rationalization, even the sense of imprecision or apparent fortuity, give us a logical and operative depth that is particularly fertile to experiment within the problems of architecture today.

More and more often the design choices have to do with the transformation of what is already built and to continue to respond to this need through poetic principles it is necessary to fit constructively into reality. The invention intended in the Picasso sense of finding in the already existing, of seeing with new eyes what surrounds us, of working with and in the already available, focuses on the research on “fundamental gestures of conquest of the real” [Badiou, 2016].

Reasoning on the ideation translated into reality means, first of all, becoming aware of the constraints of the real and the constraints that there are natural. The constraint is not the value attributed to an already given. Constraint means to bind, knot, weave: it requires a conjunction, a relationship. The constraints of reality are opportunities. When it binds, what limits the possibilities of intervention is what allows the existence and expression of the project. By narrowing the margins of maneuver, reality imposes the overcoming of the preordained abstract principles in favor of a close dialogue to explore the opportunities of the existing.

This does not mean giving up a project of our time, “present in the present time”. Quite the contrary. Assuming reality as a field of action, today’s work must “become aware of this present” [Albini, 1955] and probe the circumstances of a meeting. It is the verification of the tools and techniques through which objects and spaces can be modified to project themselves alive into the future.

Of course, this position may appear fragile, belonging to a marginal poetic, limited to minor, silent changes. If from Mozart to John Cage it is eloquent that the essence of “music



Ill. 4. Le Corbusier, *Fusion*, Source: *Le poeme de l'angle droit*, 1955

lies in the silences between sounds”, for architecture to become silent means listening, paying attention or being careful. It means therefore to concentrate on the apparently minor gaps between things, to dwell on the pauses, to catch the differences, to change one’s own sensitive approach to the phenomenology of things: to become blind, deaf, dumb, insensitive to touch, to be able to investigate and return them expanded in the project. What is affirmed is the construction of a project that builds links.

6. NARRATIONS

The search for new spatialities within the margins of the already given is tantamount to linking oneself to reality, accepting it as a fact connate by the commingling, tolerating “the alchemies” to overcome the “No!” and taking “part of the risks of life” [Le Corbusier, 1955].

The existing bears the role of a constituent part, of the architectural organism internal context. In this regard, the considerations formulated by Franco Albini are firmly current: “architecture in the present moment, I believe tends towards reality, abandoning idealistic positions, theories, principles, schemes: it tends towards the present reality, which is the result of numerous current and past components, and wants to take this reality conscience” [Albini, 1955]. Within this working perspective, rediscovering in the already given implies recovering a dimension of the project in which “sensitivity and technique must inseparably figure” [Le Corbusier, 1942]. In the indivisibility between “why we do” and “how we do”, the unity between the mathematical-technical and the intuitive-artistic modes are not only enriching elements, but depths necessary for the effective transformation of places. This denotes having to proceed “case by case”, establish relationships, evaluate energy and resources, technical feasibility and poetic ends.

The dynamic process between the legacy of history and the time in which we live can only take place according to the project internal reasons and to do this tradition helps us. It is a matter of not falling into a mimetic attitude towards the context and what it contains, but to formulate solutions that experience the insertion of multiple languages, mediating with the instances of the real to interpret it. In this horizon of coherent and complete intervention, “there is no separation between conservation and design. Between tradition and innovation it is necessary to move in an itinerant way; because the solicitations, the comparisons, the raises, the interpretations develop without ceasing and the interest in the tradition does not generate imitation, the interest in the innovation does not generate superficiality. The project has value proportional to its ability to deform itself to creep into the existing architectural stratifications, to become strata in turn changing the sense of all the others” (Giancarlo De Carlo, 1960).

This approach appears relevant as a narrative principle that highlights and brings to readability the adopted solutions and the made choices – minimum intervention, identity, data retention, distinctiveness – in the introduction of current elements on/in the pre-existing to return identity and life. The result is a new dimension of signs and signals of the present that are mingled with traditional figures in an unmistakably modern minglings.

7. EPILOGUES

Charles de Beistegui soon finds the apartment designed by Le Corbusier narrow and in 1938, when the lease expires, he leaves it to set up his impressive collections of art objects at the Château de Groussay.

The attic, however, is not destroyed. At the beginning of the 1960s, Pierre Dufau is in charge of a more classic redevelopment of the building top, still visible today. Wooden panels, white painted, hide the main building elements of the Appartement Beistegui. Under this most recent covering remain the volume of the open-air room, the stairs, some connecting steps between the terraces, and a recent urban commission (Commission du Vieux Paris, 2010) began to question about the future of this work remains.

While on the one hand it is now common ground that even the entire lecorbuserian work is a constituent and essential part of a tradition; on the other hand, the issue of an in situ reconstruction, in this case legitimized by the fact that the necessary structural elements are still present, is more controversial.

How should the Appartement Beistegui be reconstructed? With what degree of mingling? The one conveyed by the official photographs published in the *Oeuvre Complete*? Or that of the space sedimented by its owner?

These questions appear now rhetorical. However, I think that even questioning the possible answers can be understood as a way to question the deeper meaning of tradition and modernity in architecture, on the changing relationships between the past and the present that can be built only according to the project reasons, with a feeling that, varying over time and in the cultural context that produces it, is already implicitly an expression of modernity.

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