

CLAUDIA BATTAINO
ORCID: 0000-0003-0297-1719
University of Trento, Italy

PARADOX OF THE AVANT-GARDE

PARADOKS AWANGARDY

Abstract

The avant-garde concept and its structure of signification activate a fluctuation of multiple meanings. Crossing the path of architecture, as a prefiguration of a possible future, starting from the original ambiguity of the term and from the critique of the common meaning, the variety of thoughts and images of architectural practices are observed as a distinctive embryo of doing itself, the avant-garde paradox is outlined. Within the framework of different declinations, between the first avant-garde and modernism, between overcoming the legacies of the modern and radical architecture of the future, the reflection outlines some of the new values underlying the fulfillment of a new avant-garde, described as a project-process open to complexity and free to accept antithetical forms-figurations.

Keywords: avant-garde, architecture, paradox, visions, future

Streszczenie

Pojęcie awangardy i jej struktura znaczeniowa aktywują fluktuację wielorakich znaczeń. Przecinając drogę architektury jako prefiguracja potencjalnej przyszłości, wychodząc od pierwotnej wieloznaczności terminu i krytyki powszechnego znaczenia, różnorodność myśli i obrazów związanych z praktykami architektonicznymi postrzegana jest jako charakterystyczny zarodek czynienia samego siebie, zarysowuje się paradoks awangardy. W obrębie różnych deklinacji, pomiędzy pierwszą awangardą a modernizmem, między przewyżczeniem spuścizny nowoczesności a radykalną architekturą przyszłości, rozważania zarysowują niektóre z nowych wartości stanowiących podstawę realizacji nowej awangardy, opisywanej jako projekt-proces otwarty na złożoność i zdolny do przyjęcia antyetycznych form-figuracji.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, architektura, paradoks, wizje, przyszłość

1. FUTURE

In an attempt to represent a new society, architects have many times invented images for the future. There are numerous projects that give off a desire to accelerate the transformation of the present. Due to their evocative power, some of these images have become symbols of unbuilt futures, while others are fulfilled prophecies.

By altering the dimension of the repertoire of classical antiquity, making an absence prevail in the center, giving value to the void and its perception, not attributing any relevance to the function with respect to the space of the mind, the Boullè Library is undoubtedly one of these. Not only has architecture always had as its goal the imagination of a future destiny, but it has also fulfilled this desire, in the present of its buildings. The figurative ideals, for example those linked to geometric purity, of the “revolutionary architects”, as Kaufmann

defines them, are drawn with the Bauhaus, in Le Corbusier's built theories and architectures. The new approach of the most important contemporary architects, we can mention Tschumi or Koolhaas, have thematic and figurative roots that take up the themes of the years 1960s–1970s, expressed by the Archigram. In the early twentieth century, abandoning the principle of imitation and naturalism, pursuing the principle of abstraction, the geometric rigor made possible by new materials, architectural experimentalism, which then gave life to the Modern Movement, sought values, truth and beauty, in new ordering principles. Some represented a break with the established ways of conceiving and perceiving a work, they put the past into play and proposed the overcoming of tradition, others, like Loos, tried to compose tradition with innovative techniques.

The paradigm shift in the conception of forms and structures is that they had to be “absolutely modern”, to use the poet's words, with the aim of interpreting the new sensitivity and needs of a society transformed by science and techniques. If in front of the classical work of art it was kept at a distance between the subject and the object of the representation, which brought out its aura and prevented its desecration, in art in the era of Benjamin's technical reproducibility, this distance is canceled. The viewer, fragmenting and breaking down his images, becomes more and more an actor of reality, redefining its sequences. In the center is the sign. The unveiled sign has in itself the rules of the sign, it speaks of itself, outside the traditional rules. As theorized by Kandinsky, the “sign for the sign”, the “text for the text”, “art for art”, become the new symbols of the signifier, from which new forms arise both in art and in architecture. The vagueness or ambiguity of Duchamp's *Great Glass* is that it takes on complete meaning in apparently meaningless words, it is a composition that with its enigma makes the connection between sign and context understandable. The structure of the work and its formal value lend themselves to being “meaning”.

2. OPERATORS

From Duchamp's *ready-made* onwards, the continuous exploration of expressive forms, techniques and materials, the subversion of consolidated rules, has brought to light the supremacy of flows and relationships, of body and mind, of process and program, of provocation and surprise, overcoming the dominance of the form-function alone and avoiding, in the best cases, the ordinary and the banal. Continuously experimenting with what in the past was perceived as an exception and arbitrariness, the movement of the “advanced” contemporary avant-garde, with respect to its inevitable modern presuppositions, in the face of multiple, heterogeneous, discontinuous and ever-changing urban spaces, has proposed some cornerstones for architecture production.

Forms associated with elementary figures, complicated by superimposition, addition, interpenetration, represent contemporary space and its characteristics, above all they make it possible for all scales to distinguish and measure the distance of all the perceptive elements that they enclose in their space. Layers, hybridizations, juxtapositions, fluidity, instability, transparency, represent the keywords underlying the new radical architecture. The leap is cognitive, an oscillating movement between the object and the sense, between the replacement of the known reference system with others that are unknown or introduced by force. The creative process of the contemporary avant-garde uses texts and words operators that contain alienating descriptions or imaginative results. The oscillation between paradoxical elements, such as disorientation,

explosion, deformation, overturning, cancellation, exclusion, becomes an operational practice that uses the past as a challenge and the future as a prophecy, with a planning hope.

Even if in some cases, by taking originality and authorship to the extreme, the architecture of the star system, according to the market norm, has failed and has therefore lost the more radical ability to propose the new, risking a process of standardization, a phenomenon common also in fashion, in which after having produced new models, they become a new style or passing too lightly to another novelty, when the previous one ceases to be such.

2.1. DISAMBIGUATIONS

When we talk about cutting-edge projects, cutting-edge tools, cutting-edge technologies, what do we mean? What is the original meaning of *avant-garde*? What is behind this concept? The term *avant-garde* derives from the military language, from the French *avant-garde*, before the guard, and was used to indicate the soldiers who proceed, for the purpose of ensuring security, in an advanced position, regarding the remaining army troops. From the first of the two terms that make up the word, *avant*, the ambiguity of the concept of *avant-garde* is evident: in military technique, it has a spatial meaning at the same time it takes on a temporal meaning, that of being constantly ahead of history. The contradiction underlying the metaphor of the word *avant-garde*, from the Greek μεταφορᾱί, meaning transfer of meaning that expresses a concept different from the original one, lies precisely in the fact that it is “advanced”, that is constantly ahead. We can affirm that every artistic *avant-garde*, therefore also the architectural one, establishes relations with space and with time by loading itself with ideological assumptions, deriving from the relative socio-economic conditioning. But the phenomena and effects of the profound change of a thought or of the practices underlying it are understandable and ascertainable only a posteriori. The second of the two terms that make up the word, *garde*, is equally meaningful. In fact, it indicates a collectivity anticipating the course of history, which finds its reason for being in the idea of progress, in which every past must be rejected, in order to realize the future in the present. That is to say, the enemy is not something that lies ahead, but the historical order.

The first *avant-garde* refers to an invention, rather than to discovery as the creation of an unveiled something, and is intended as a group movement. Movement is not something static or classic but it is something dynamic and open, which with the aim of spreading an ideal or an action, charges against something or someone, nullifying traditional values. This was very strong for example in Italian Futurism, which in the strict sense and as an organized group, developed artistic programs, based on theoretical manifestos in which the machine, technology, big industry and the speed of the new art had to start from the present, to erase the links with history and with the past. It is evident in the Bauhaus experience, where the dense interdisciplinary research applied to beauty, to the functional, to the rigorous, with social and democratic purposes, has given rise to a change linked to the subsequent process of mechanization.

In the current era, dominated by the constant flow of images and electrons, the vision of architecture is at the same time more technological and ecological. The oscillations between myth – narrative reduction – and figure – modeled external appearance – are evident in that emblematic masterpiece of transparency and lightness, which is Ito's Sendai Mediatheque, a building hollowed out of light pylons, which contain the vertical connections, the information networks, air, water and light. By altering the dimension, associating oscillating measures between that of limit, which generates its sense, and those that go beyond its limit, architecture goes “beyond”: in the large dimension, the internal surface contained in a circle, in the given dimension and known of the

pillar symbol/sign, by free association it becomes the hollow living space, that is, not only the supporting structure, but also the structure and the new body of ecological architecture.

2.2. TRANSFORMATION ACCELERATORS

The avant-garde represented by a notion and an aesthetic, by a feeling that deviates from the permanent, from the useful, from the functional, has been produced in some manifesto works, which have expressed new values through their poetics and their figurative paradigms. Typological distortion and displacement sanction a new tradition of contemporary architecture. As Tschumi has long theorized, the alphabet of architecture is not expressed through the codes of unity, stability, harmony and hierarchy, that is, through grammar and the system of rules, which despite being challenged by the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, like Cubism and Constructivism, they had still given rise to a code of belonging and a language in architecture. Following a practice based on formal antinomies, in the Fresnoy school of art in Tourcoing (1992) the project questions the common sense of the observer and makes him interact with the surrounding environment. The space is neither internal nor external, nor unitary nor fragmented, it is a continuous game of subtractions and dis-junctions, which unhinges the perceptive structures we are used to, orienting us towards complex geometries and unexpected points of view. By eradicating the spatial composition structured on Euclidean geometry, the strategies adopted seek a deconstructive and emotional dimension of space, which, Eisemann notes “dislocates the discursive function of the subject and, at the same time, of the vision, and which creates a condition of time, of an event, in which there is the possibility that it is the environment that observes the subject, the possibility of a look beyond”.

Since the discovery of the Soviet avant-gardes, in particular from the lesson of Malevich and Leonidov, Koolhaas's research questions the principle of the unity of space, introducing deconstruction as an opening to new investigations on form. In the unrealized masterplan project for the first competition phase of the Villette park, he conceives a new type of space, which will become an operational model for subsequent Landscape Urbanism interventions. The park project, drawn in plan, in two dimensions, through diagrams and overlapping different levels, calls into question the traditional figure-ground relationship. The approach adopted, with overlapping layers, divides the space into many parallel bands, which in the second phase of the competition will become as many landscape situations, that is, the third, natural dimension of the project. The new space is imagined as an open program, consisting of an archipelago of diversified architectural fragments, arranged according to a distributive, flexible and non-hierarchical algorithm. Following this strategy, the proposed approach outlines a new way of conceiving space, which values the movement, the continuous mutation of the elements. The continuous change of the perception and of the hierarchy of the elements, decrees the end of the form as geometry and function. A de-materialized one defines the congestion of a large horizontal skyscraper, which has a vague memory of the places in Manhattan, as a suitable place to organize and make different situations and experiences coexist, related to entertainment and cultural facilities.

2.3. NEW ACHIEVEMENTS

The house as a *machine à abiter* theorized by Le Corbusier, when industrial production and cities were expanding, as a mechanism to create quality spaces for man's life and his vision

that puts man at the center, takes up a challenge. Architecture as a concrete tool for achieving social justice is more relevant than ever. But after years of development, the world is today in a systemic crisis, which manifests itself in all fields, environmental, social, economic, cultural and this has produced, therefore, a crisis of traditional values, of duration, monumentality, unity, rule, etc. on the basis of which the architecture was defined.

What significance does the avant-garde have today? Architecture, as a sensor of society, is again called to rethink the social order, to give answers to issues of environmentalism, civil rights. There is therefore a need to generate and experiment ethical and aesthetic methods and matrices that intertwine architecture and environment, recombining several arts, to open architecture to impermanence and nature, contextualizing movements, flows, colors, sounds, perceptual systems, in new ecologies. Architecture is profoundly changing, reflecting the new theories that describe complexity, also taking into account dust, unpredictable and variable factors. Even chance, and time are now essential elements in the composition of a work. Although not all critics agree on the results of this change, it has been highlighted that it is comparable, in some respects, to that which originated the Modern Movement. But, as previously said, if the phenomena and effects of an avant-garde and of the practices underlying it are understandable and ascertainable only a posteriori, this entails as a consequence that the new narrative of the avant-garde also outlines its fulfillment, that is, the conclusion of an avant-garde and the beginning of a new trend.

In a survey of the contemporary avant-garde, Beatrice Galilee, critic and curator of the MET in New York, outlines the traces of the radical architecture of the future, between the built and the imagined, through a series of interdisciplinary approaches, which go well beyond the simple building construction. The research of the architectural avant-garde is diversifying its operational strategies. Therefore, alternative ways of configuring the body-space relationship emerge, which follow Abramovic's in-depth lesson. In the reinterpretation and overcoming of durability and materiality, Lacaton & Vassal's projects give importance to transparency and fluidity as new cornerstones and sensitive themes, which are also found in Sejima's works. Among the projects that take on the traces of a new radical architecture in their poetics: the Plasencia Auditorium and Congress Center of Selgas Cano (2017), a luminous meteorite that barely touches the ground in which it is placed, designed to playfully intertwine different activities, making use of transparent materials and poor construction solutions to minimize its footprint on the environment, with respect to the landscape; the urban and metropolitan experience of the High Line in New York, the railway recovered by Diller + Scofidio with Field Operations (1993), is a place-space loaded with relational and communicational values, very distant from monumentality, which in different times and spaces welcomes and combines events of music, art, poetry, etc., which become the key to reflect on the different social conditions and on the life of the city; the vision of the BIG group's architecture, of hedonistic sustainability, is explicit in a project that has become iconic in the history of design and applied technology, the Copenh-Hill; here the architecture, open to nature and ecology, translates into the artifice of a hill-park, where you can practice sports in all seasons, an expression of environmental attention and innovation of an intelligent and clean building, the waste-to-energy plant with emissions zero; the forms that introject the game, and at the same time constitute a critical form of the urban development of WORKac, which in the Miami Museum Garage (2018) investigates the new beauty of the facade of one of the many multi-storey car parks located in the city center, which becomes a real social device, a narrow, seven-storey high space that houses a swimming pool, a library, a gallery, a small auditorium and a beach park on the roof; the de-monumentalization

and the intersections of flows between rural-urban, the critique of the stable and permanent decentralization utopias of Wright's Broadacre City, are evident in the panorama of Drawing Architecture Studio's Tabobao Village-Smallacre City, for the Chinese pavilion of the Biennale of Venice (2018), not only an imaginary portrait of a rural Chinese village, which represents the new model of economy and rural society in the era of commerce. In various cases, in an attempt to pave the way for future social, political and environmental change, buildings and cities, built or imagined, many of these experiments draw upon themes and currents of thought that originally emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, when radical architects reacted against international modernism, fascinated by the new promises of technology and the discovery of the external environment.

2.4. INCURSIONS

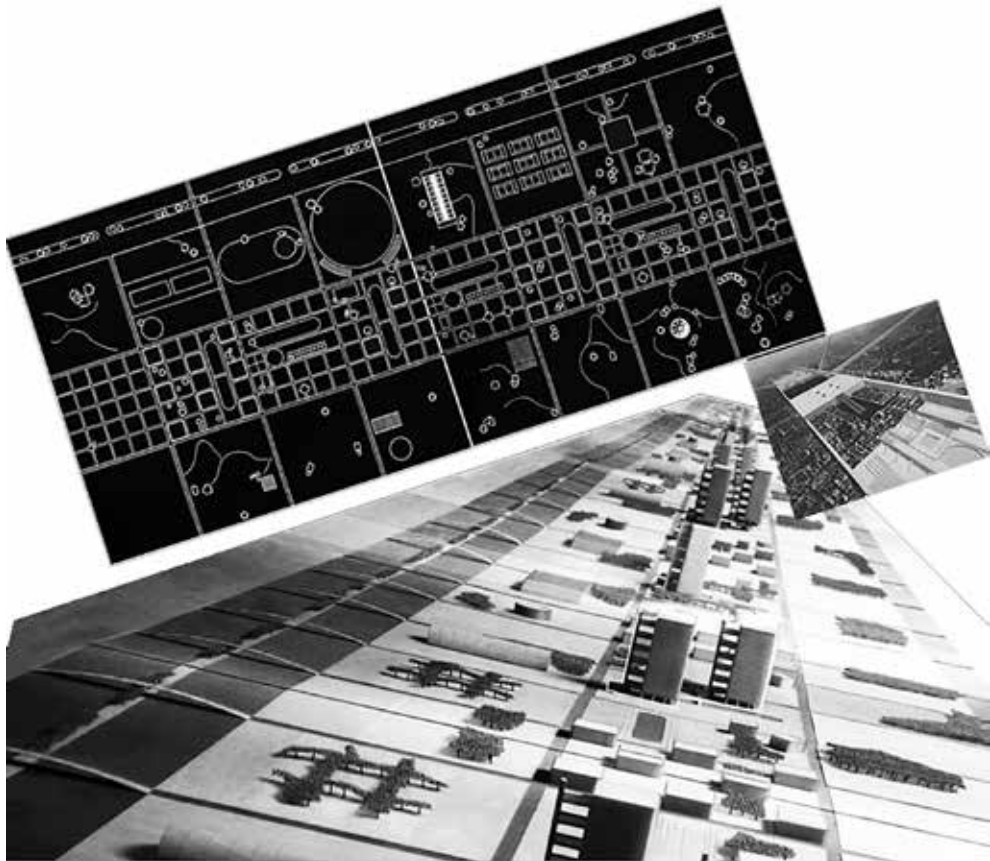
With the demolition of the Nakagin Capsule Tower, the loss of the legacy of an emblematic model of the post-war Japanese architectural avant-garde is at risk. The complex, the result of the serial composition of compact housing capsules, built in concrete, characterized by port-hole openings reminiscent of washing machines, to adapt to changing urban and social needs, combined the tradition of the futon with the innovative technology of the 1970s. The tower, consisting of two tall buildings, represented a concrete response to the housing needs of the workers, who reached Tokyo from the satellite cities. Kurokawa's metabolism project involved the planned change and replacement of modules, to adapt to changing urban and social needs, but it was never realized. The structure was therefore in a state of severe decay, due to poor maintenance and post-earthquake damage it was in a state of neglect.

This is just one of the many approaches of the architectural avant-gardes, which entrusted its evocative power to the image of a future suspended in its timelessness. Within this framework, we can also list the numerous projects of living, heirs of the rational idea of architecture and the city, conceived in a historical moment of particular importance for the demand for houses, have proposed building-city integration strategies to the advantage of collective life and document the use of certain construction techniques. As the economic, social and environmental conditions vary, on these urban materials – made from the Bauhaus period until a few years ago, on industrialized and standardized construction models and technologies – time seems to be imprinted in the cruelest way. Facing the Madonna Bianca, a residential model district designed in the 1970s for the urban development of Trento – it is indisputable that the dream of a part of the city surrounded by nature, which has having assimilated the typological models of the garden city theorized by Howard and those of the vertical city of skyscrapers by Le Corbusier on *pilotis* in the green, has come true. But it is not surprising that with the disappearance of that type of society, as it had been imagined, those iconic, magical towers, imagined as real incursions (from the Latin *incursio*, to run against) in time and space to be always new, show today all their spatial, structural and energy deficiencies. These problems have been deepened also in the “Study for the architectural an urban regeneration of the Madonna Bianca Towers” (2017).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The forms of the avant-garde underlie quite different issues and themes, that are not banal. What is the future of this imagined future and when did it grow old? What is our relationship

with the new today, which the architecture of the various avant-gardes has taken on as an indispensable value for imagining the future? (Ill. 1). Some think that there is a serious misunderstanding among architects: it is thought they are inventors and they always need to feel avant-garde, but it is impossible to be at the forefront permanently, so Ungers summarizes the aporia of the avant-garde. All this gives us hope for a new period for architecture, which, as Tafuri said in the seventies, without indulging in “utopian and futuristic projects”, the realization of which would be in contrast with the crisis of the current world, today shows the actions of a conscious process of the environment, of dialectical confrontation with the existing, with the models of historical tradition and rationalist experiences. From a morphological and operational point of view, this new experimentation includes and connects the project of addition and that of subtraction and also the imaginative irruption of the project of substitution of what feels like the need to completely transform, avoiding pure arbitrariness and crystallization, in fixed and immutable forms, which by their very nature would not have the possibility of evolving in a future landscape.



Ill. 1. *Innumerevoli possibili. Leonidov, Town of Magnitogorsk (1930), Rem Koolhaas et Zoe Zenghelis, Exodus, the voluntary prisoners (1972) collage by Claudia Battaino and Paolo Fossati 2012.*

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Author's Note:

Assoc. Prof. Claudia Battaino, PhD, Arch.

Architect, an associate professor at the University of Trento, Italy. She has worked and published extensively on urban projects, with a particular focus on the public spaces and on the spaces of nature in the city. Author of architectural projects and projects of territories and derelict landscapes. She had previously taught at the University of Architecture IUAV of Venice and the University of Udine.

claudia.battaino@unitn.it