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AVANT-GARDE. THINKING OF ARCHITECTURE THROUGH DRAWINGS

AWANGARDA. ROZWAŻANIA O ARCHITEKTURZE POPRZECZ RYSUNKI

Abstract

The paper describes three works elaborated during the years 2020–2022 answering to invitations to produce an artistic/architectural drawing on a theme related, in these strange years, to pandemic or to war. In this sense the works have been an opportunity to reflect on the fundamentals of Architecture but also to experiment an idea of avant-garde not intended as a historiographical category but as a posture that use the art (in this case architecture and drawing together) with an aesthetic-political aim. Each work/drawing represents a pavilion and, in its absence of a real function, the small architectures are also a pretext to reflect on stereotomy and tectonic as the two essential ways of making architecture, affirming the significant identity and unity between the interrelated and inseparable moments of composition and construction.

Keywords: works of art/architecture, drawings, pavilion, stereotomy, tectonics

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia trzy prace wykonane w latach 2020–2022 będące odpowiedzią na zaproszenia do wykonania artystycznego/architektonicznego rysunku na temat związany z pandemią lub wojną w tych dziwnych latach.

W tym ujęciu prace te stały się okazją do refleksji nad podstawami architektury, ale także do eksperymentowania z ideą awangardy, która nie ma być kategorią historiograficzną, ale postawą wykorzystującą sztukę (w tym przypadku architekturę i rysunek) w celu estetyczno-politycznym.

Każda praca/rysunek przedstawia pawilon, a przy braku prawdziwej funkcji, te obiekty małej architektury są również pretekstem do refleksji nad stereotomią i tektoniką jako dwoma zasadniczymi sposobami tworzenia architektury, potwierdzając istotną tożsamość i jedność powiązanych i nierozdzielnych momentów kompozycji i konstrukcji.

Słowa kluczowe: dzieła sztuki/architektura, rysunki, pawilon, stereotomia, tektonika

1. PREMISE

The origin of the term “avant-garde” is related to the military field. It indicates the military unit that, in navy or army, precedes all the others. From here, the figurative use of the word

denotes the act of proceeding with greater commitment and more decisiveness of the others, assuming a guide role. In the field of art, avant-garde defines movements that propose new poetics and expressive ways in contrast, in different modes and levels, with the current taste. The official histories of architecture define the “avant-garde” as historical category including the German Expressionism, the Russian Constructivism, the Dutch Neo-Plasticism, in Italy the Futurism and, in some way, then the Rationalism. All the terms show the suffix *-ism* that, from the ancient Greek *-ισμός*, added to a noun or an adjective, indicates religious, social, philosophical and, precisely, artistic movement but, in a more general sense, peculiarities or characteristics of a style or a language.

This is not the right place to discuss these topic here: the focus of this essay are some “works of art/architecture”, realized by Federica Visconti and Renato Capozzi in the last two years, during the pandemic and then, under the horrific war condition in Europe in which we live today, related to the theme of “avant-garde” reasoning in its ideological connotation. Its nature is aesthetic-political, proposing an *a priori* vision of reality; it refuses to be placed in the boundaries of a precise and specialized field of art and it looks at all the manifestations of art as a unity, actively working to transform the reality. This aesthetic-political character is the common reading key of four works, while drawing is the tool.

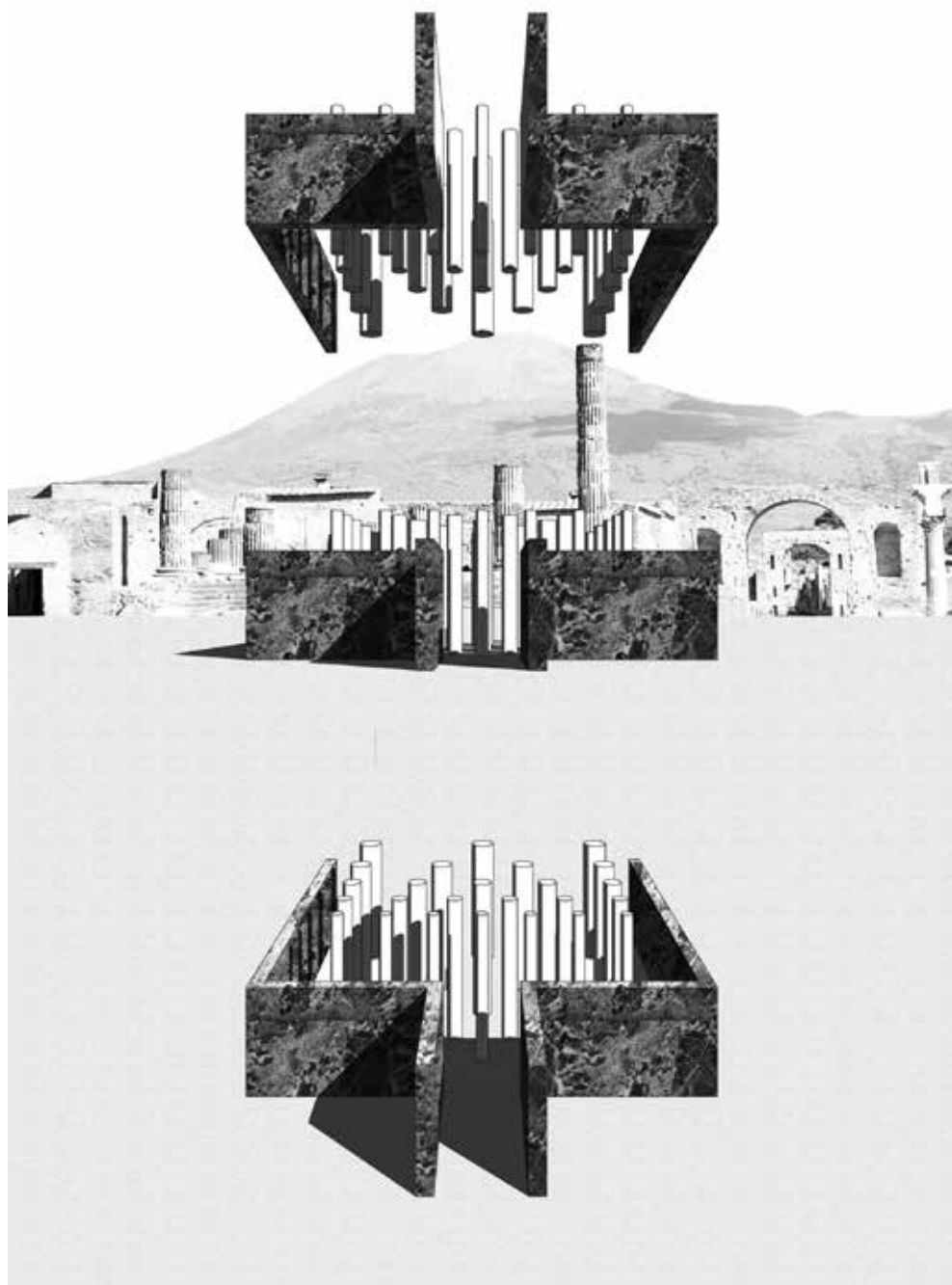
2. MEMENTO VIRUS. THINKING OF CULTURE OF INHABITING, DURING PANDEMIC

The first work is called Memento virus and it was developed during the “state of exception” determined by the first Covid-19 lockdown, answering to the invitation by Riccardo Palma and Federico Bilò to participate in the initiative “Il cielo in trentatré stanze” (The sky in thirty-three rooms)¹. The title testifies the will of codifying, within the paradigm of the enclosure, the extreme condition of months of confinement in which we all lived. A marble enclosure, a room, in a spiral shape with an entrance defined by two-wall door leaves, and a wide opening near and in the direction of woodland, defines the primordial act of delimiting a place. Following Le Corbusier, in the example of the original temple, this is the act that defines the condition of possibility of human settling and inhabiting. “Memento virus” is not a simple enclosure, albeit open and facing the nature: in fact, within this space, defined by otherness with respect to the outside, whether urban or natural, there are some rows of columns that thin out their span in their progressive arrangement and increase, at the same time, both their diameter and height. Thus, the columns define a progression within an isonomic repetition that emblemizes the progressive and gradual liberation of bodies that, far from socially distancing themselves according to the paradoxical and fateful definition used at the time, gain a new reconciled and balanced relationship with nature, the same offended nature from which the virus originated.

In other words, “Memento virus” is an enclosure that produces a room, as it was written on this occasion:

[...] following Louis Kahn, the room is the beginning of architecture and the buildings are societies of rooms, places “good” to live, work, learn. Finally, the places of the city are based on the human agreement; they are rooms of which the sky is the roof. Thus, private rooms but

¹ F. Bilò, R. Palma, *Il cielo in trentatré stanze*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2020.



Ill. 1. F. Visconti+R. Capozzi, *Memento virus*, 2020.

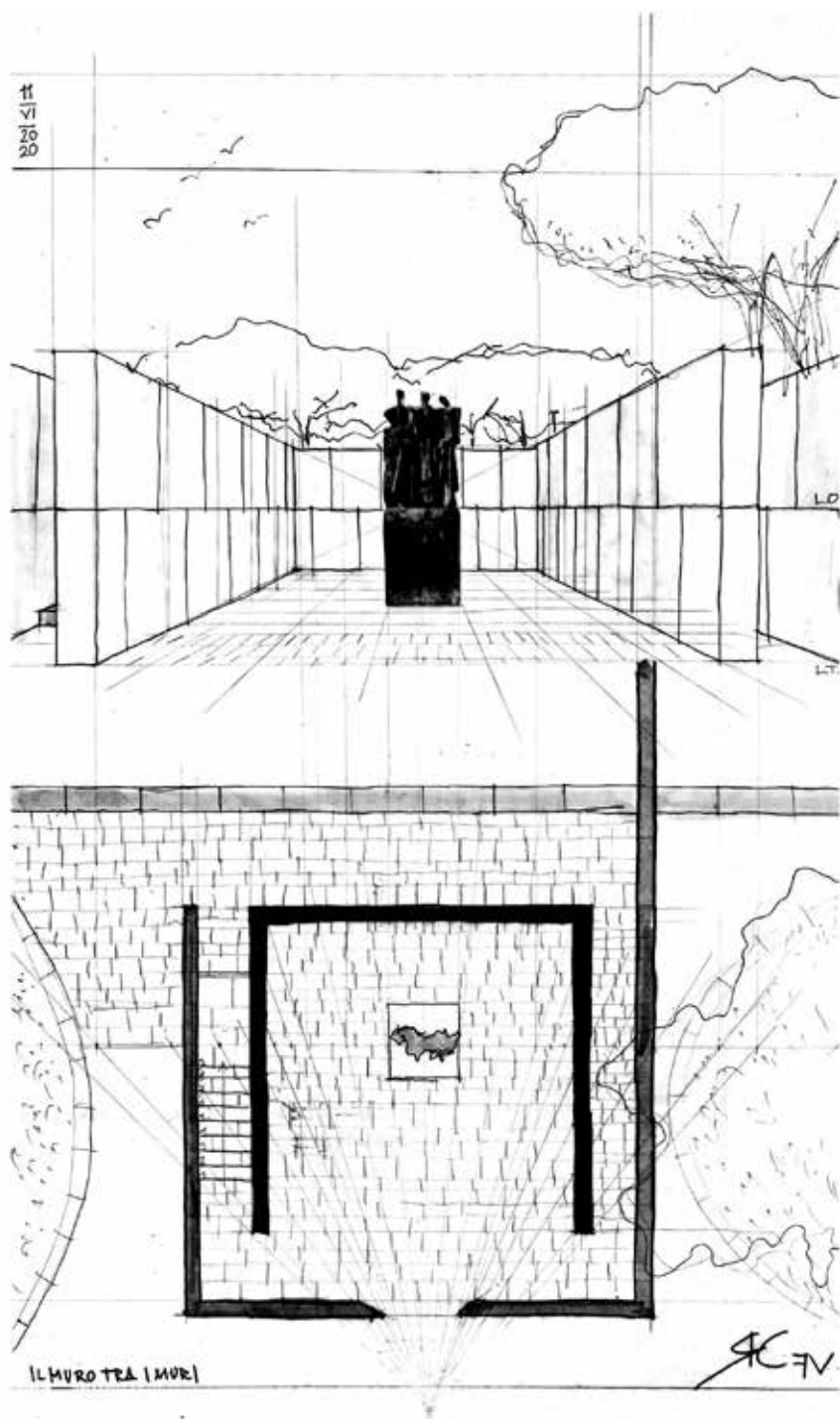
also rooms in which to live together and rooms for the collective, public representation of the shared values of a society. We need to learn again to inhabit these rooms and to design them, for us and for others, remembering that *abitare* is a verb with a Latin origin, frequentative form of *habere*, which means “to have with continuity” and, therefore, to establish, with the “room”, a relationship of confidence. “San Girolamo in his studio”, painted by Antonello da Messina, is familiar with his space, closed but from which it is possible to observe the minute landscape painted by the artist in the two windows and the sky beyond the mullioned windows. This space is not very different from the space that Kahn sketches in his drawing *The Room*: also, here a vaulted room, a body – to measure it, a window on the landscape and then a hearth, the archetype of inhabiting because the fire, around which men get together, excavates a spherical space in the dark. The hearth burned in the atrium of the Roman house, that patio where, as Jean-Pierre Vernant reminds us, Hestia and Hermes meet: again, the earth and the sky. [...] When Marc Augé identified the characteristics of “sur-modernity” as the narrowing of space, the acceleration of time and the individualization of destinies, he couldn’t imagine the effect that the pandemic had had on the human condition. A space that has been compressed because every place has become reachable – even by a virus – now sees us limited in spaces where the time flows slower, making clear that they are not always adequate for this changed form of inhabiting. The space of the house – this space that is no longer designed in architecture schools and is no longer built in our world, in favour of more attractive and expendable artefacts – returns to the centre of our attention but only if, following Leon Battista Alberti, we will be able to return in designing houses as cities and cities as houses, facing, in this way, the main danger of our time: the individualization of destiny to which architecture, as a civil art, should never resign itself. Memento virus project accompanies, through the proper tool of architecture, these reflections on the space of inhabiting during the Covid-19 time. It is not just a composition exercise that combines the stereotomy of the wall and the tectonics of the columns – the enclosure and the hypostyle – but the prefiguration of a space that has the sky as its roof and which, from a compressed condition between the columns, gradually expands to regain a relationship, today more than ever unavoidable, with the natural openness. A “room under the sky”, inhabited by columns that thin out.²

3. *IL MURO NEI MURI* (THE WALL INSIDE THE WALLS). INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR SPATIALITY

The second work is *Il muro nei muri* (The wall inside the walls), elaborated for the exhibition *L’opera d’arte nell’opera d’arte* edited by Franco Purini and Enrico Ansaloni in Palazzo Lucarini in Terni. The work represents the development of a previous work: a pavilion for the Architecture Festival designed during the cooperation between the team of the Department of Architecture_DiARC of the “Federico II” University of Naples, the Department of Urban Planning of the Campania Region³ for the participation in the Call promoted by the MiBACT_Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage.

² F. Visconti, R. Capozzi, *Patio-Ipostilo. Memento Virus*, in F. Bilò, R. Palma, *op. cit.*

³ DiARC team: professors Renato Capozzi, Ferruccio Izzo (team leader), Michelangelo Russo (DiARC head), Enrico Formato with architects Alberto Calderoni and Vanna Cestarello. Campania Region team: Bruno Discepolo (alderman) with architect Carlo De Luca (head of the staff).



III. 2. F. Visconti+R. Capozzi, *Il muro nei muri*, 2021.

The theme of the pavilion is central in the experience of the modern: it could be enough to think of Bruno Taut's glass pavilion or the Barcelona pavilion by Mies van der Rohe. Also, the 1931 model-house and, above all, the Farnsworth house by Mies – the house Carlos Martí Arís rightly wrote about is indeed a pavilion – show a way of composition where few and essential elements are combined: roof, base or a wall and column as archetypes of architecture. In the field of Architecture, the value of the archetype is in the germinal possibility that it allows: an original typology that produces other typologies, new formal configurations that can be traced back to that ideal and abstract paradigm. The wall that divides, delimits and encloses represents the essential way of the continuity to define places of an interior spatiality, rooms, concave spaces. The column, which becomes autonomous and singular, represents the essential mode of discontinuity and qualifies the places of an exterior spatiality between convex objects. The columns, when repeated along a line, define a portico, in the circumscribing sense of a *peristasis*, while in the isotropic sense, they define a hypostyle as a punctuated space and place of tension between *stilo*i.

The “A_Pavillon” project, designed for the Architecture Festival of Campania Region, was the first occasion to investigate the possibility of building installations aimed at disseminating architectural culture: among them a central pavilion, first planned in the courtyard of Palazzo Reale in Naples and then in the garden of Villa Pignatelli facing the municipal *villa* and the sea. The theme was to define an easily mountable space for events, placed close to the garden fence, between two flowerbeds where the twin kiosks at the park entrance are. A delicate issue to be solved, with essentiality. Among the different proposals, one explored the composition of a wall system able to reveal itself outside the fence, engraved with the letter “A”, that, entering the space of the park, folds to accommodate the presence of the theory of columns that had to define the pergola-hypostyle. Three columns on the outside dialogued, alluding to a portico, with the continuity of the wall raised from the ground. The diaphanous elements and the colours – red, yellow and blue – are a tribute to Gianugo Polesello⁴, “master of walls and columns”. A sketch donated by Renato Capozzi to the collection *Disegni d'autore* of the University of Genoa⁵ documented the proposal for the “A_Pavillon”, unfortunately un-built due to shortage of funds. Again for economic reasons, many variants of the project were developed up to the definitive solution, similar to the spiral *House for two* by Eduard Ludwig, then further simplified following the morpheme extracted by Giorgio Grassi's *Monumento ai caduti della Resistenza* in Brescia where a spire contains a tortuous system of opposed walls-labyrinths placed on the two sides of the central path in a clear analogy with the city and its urban fabrics.

The same morpheme has been used and re-meaning for the exhibition *L'opera d'arte nell'opera d'arte* edited by Franco Purini and Enrico Ansaloni⁶: in this case, the open spiral enclosure with one of the three sides elongated towards the road is opposed to the second “U”-shaped enclosure that, in the space in between, allows on the one hand to enter and, on the other hand, a symbolic exit through by stairs ending in a projecting balcony from which you can see the public garden and the sea. *Il muro nei muri* is a kind of labyrinth not for the meeting with the Minotaur or for the search for the Ariadne's thread but again a “room under

⁴ See the project for piazza Municipio in Napoli, in S. Bisogni, G. Polesello (eds.), *L'architettura del Limite. Napoli-Municipio Marittima: due progetti a confronto*, Clean Edizioni, Napoli 1993.

⁵ P. Trucco, R. Lucentini, *Disegni d'autore. Una raccolta dell'Archivio di architettura*, Genova University Press, Genova 2021.

⁶ F. Purini, E. Ansaloni, *L'opera d'arte nell'opera d'arte*, Libria, Melfi 2021.

the sky” ready to welcome (as the editors of the exhibition asked) another work of art: in this case, a sculpture by Mario Negri – *The wall* – that represent, in the group of three people, the array, the theory, the frontage. A wall inside other walls, that overcomes them and allows and promise to look beyond.

Il muro nei muri is the construction of a double space of interiority and the language and the correlative character of the architecture is based on the continuity of the wall that defines the ruby red exterior boundary: inside, a white room offers asylum and protection to the bronze sculpture that surmounts it. Two continuous elements (the architectural walls), including each other, envelop a singularity (the sculptural wall) that in the isonomic repetition of the figures and bodies alludes to the principle of the limit and the threshold, however, already visible from the outside. An *opus* (masonry) that houses a (plastic) work: however, an *ergon* as a whole.

4. A WALL OPENED TO LET THE COLUMNS PASS... MAKE ARCHITECTURE, NOT WAR

The third and final work is *Un muro che si apre per far passare le colonne...* (A wall opened to let the columns pass...), elaborated for the exhibition *Make Architecture, not War* edited by Olga Starodubova and Giovanni Menna in Palazzo Gravina in Naples⁷, which proposed to many Italian architects to make a drawing to affirm – against the war in Ukraine and against all wars and the war itself – that Architecture is construction and, thus, refuses to destroy.

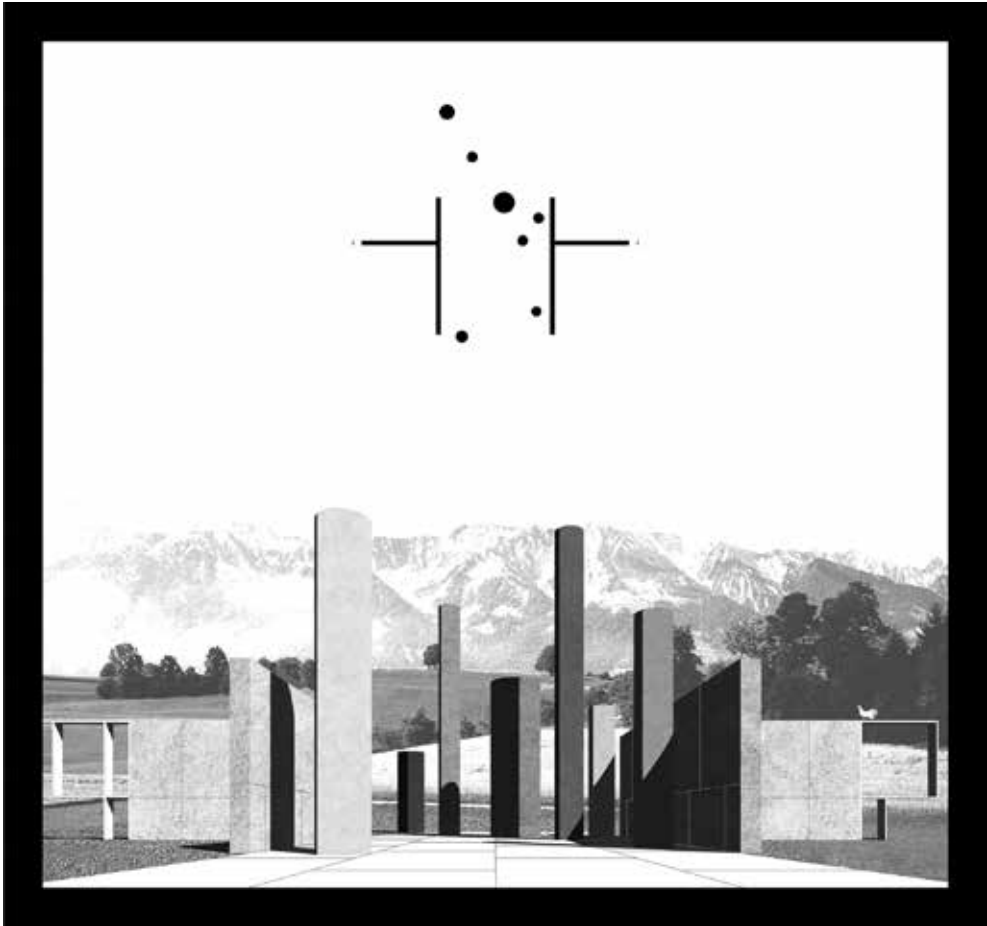
Also in this case, probably more than in the others, Architecture (and drawings) are used to affirm a political idea.

Architecture is condition of possibility and, at the same time, representation of the human life. Architecture is *causa et index*. Without a shelter, an enclosure, a protection, the life cannot take roots, on the other hand, it is the action of building a space, transforming a place that makes life possible and represents its modes, its beauty, its greatness. The architecture is intrinsically a social art based, following Stendhal⁸, on *une promesse de bonheur*. The architecture is intrinsically constructive and appears in order to modify the *status quo*, to make the better, more adequate world and in this it finds its legitimacy. The forms it creates, its constructs, its spaces – outcome of these forms – represent life and inhabiting. Obviously, the architecture is, as all art, a super-structure that is not able to radically change the course of history and the structures that determine reality, but certainly can improve things, environment, and places. In other terms, it can contribute at, together with other manifestations of human mind, realizing a better perspective for all in which it is possible to recognize themselves independently to race, colour, worship. Architecture is capable, as Walter Benjamin stated, of a generalized reception. Forms are not right or wrong, moral or immoral, they are forms which include thought and that, in their composition – in their grain, materials, colours, proportions and measures – makes them expressive of the meanings and values that presuppose them. Theodor Adorno in his *Parva æsthetica* wrote:

⁷ Catalogue in printing. The exhibition by O. Starodubova, G. Menna, *Make Architecture not War*, Palazzo Gravina, Napoli 22 April–05 May 2022.

⁸ *La beauté n'est jamais, ce me semble, qu'une promesse de bonheur* in Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence*, Calmann-Levy Editeurs, Paris, 1854, p. 30.

Architecture worthy of man has a better opinion of men and societies than that corresponding to their real state [...] Not all reason is on the side of architecture, nor all the wrong from that of men who, however, suffer the wrong of being kept, both consciously and unconsciously, in a state of minority, and therefore of not having the possibility of identifying with their own interest. Precisely because architecture is autonomous but also, effectively, linked to a purpose, it cannot simply deny men as they are; even if, as autonomous, it must do so.⁹



III. 3. F. Visconti+R. Capozzi with Nicola Campanile, *Un muro che si apre per far passare le colonne...*, 2022.

Thus, the architecture is for human being, but it has to make itself worthy, thinking of a better man than he is now, of a man who does not kill others, of a man who cooperates with other men for the common good, of a society that recognizes itself in shared and universal

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Funktionalismus heute*, lecture held during the congress Deutscher Werkbund in 1965, published in Id., *Ohne Leitbild: Parva aesthetica*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1967, pp. 7–19.

values and that does not discriminate but welcomes. An indissoluble link exists between architecture and men: the first has to become autonomous in order to respond to needs, the second, in order not to live in the state of minority in which they are, has to work for a change that architecture can make real.

Trying to represent this capability of *Baukunst*, the drawing – which represents an architecture – uses two archetypal elements: the wall and the column. The wall, the eponymous continuum and concave, defines the limit – *limes* and *limen* at the same time – the separation between before and after, between the interior and the exterior but, in its interruption, it suggests the transitivity, it is a threshold, a connection. The column, eponymous discrete and convex, usually called to support a roof in its isonomic or differentiated repetition, defines an open, traversable, floating space; it does not occlude and not define internality but rather a presence. The two elements together symbolize the separation that every conflict determines but also the possibility of openness and exchange not only between *isoi* or *heteroi* but, above all, between *xenoi*. Columns of different materials, colours, sizes, sections and heights confront each other and inhabit the passage that alludes to two wings of a door, wide open to connect previously separated and hostile territories. The seven columns – of different sections, heights and primary and complementary colours – symbolize peace as a communion between different flags; the wall at the ends becomes diaphanous, transforming itself into a trellis, and a dove on the top is waiting to fly away.

The selected and composed architectural elements and the nature they host create a rhetorical figure of the symbolic *hypotyposis* (*Darstellung*), through which, in agreement with Kant, the idea (architecture opposed to war) in itself is not sensibly represented, through a series of axiological analogies – walls and columns/separation and meeting/war and peace – shows itself in a sensible form.

5. CONCLUSION: PRECISELY AND ONLY ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

The three works (pavilions), during the pandemic and war period, suggested reflection on the fundamentals (of life and architecture), affirm the significant identity and unity between the interrelated and inseparable moments of composition and construction: they show how a constructive and conformative principle – the wall-enclosure – can be integrated every time with a tectonic principle – the support-column – or be compared with a singularity defined by an artistic presence. Thus, the three works fully interpret and represent both the canon and the particular expressive code. The language that is adopted is similar but the expressiveness expected in the syntactic relationship between the composite elements is, on the contrary, different. The specific nature of the wall, is able to define closed or suspended, open or underground enclosures, while the convex nature of the column or of the sculpture or of the columns in their variation, time to time, contrasts and completes the concavity of the “cut space”, of the space excluded from the view that the continuity of the wall-enclosure represents and is able to gain. That space – that of the last horizon excluded from the gaze – is that admirably represented by Giacomo Leopardi in *L'infinito*.

It is a way of working on simple, a-syntagmatic, constitutively autonomous and absolute elements that are clearly exposed and hierarchically distinct: thus, capable of never getting confused or agglutinated with others. These spaces, deprived of any practical function, built

only to meditate on the pure essence of inhabiting, are spaces that found places and are distinguished from the openness of the nature to with which they contrast through their finiteness, delimitation, exactness of relationships even if they always turn towards them by opening, gaining elevated position and unprecedented opportunities for overlooking.

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