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THE HIDDEN TRUTH IN ARCHITECTURE

UKRYTA PRAWDA W ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

Starting from the concept of unveiling and hidings, activating a fluctuation of sense, the essay reflects on the generating ambiguity of the true-false meaning, which suggests ideas and images that confirm the fertile value of the proposed dichotomy. The description of examples observed as working knots reflects on architecture as a work of art and, therefore, on its formal value and meaning. With this approach, architecture is described as a method open to complexity and free to accommodate antithetical forms. The hidden truth coexists with its own *poiesis*.

Keywords: truth, deception, hidden, unveiled

Streszczenie

Wychodząc od zagadnień odkrywania i ukrywania wywołujących wahania sensu, esej poddaje refleksji twórczą dwuznaczność pojęć prawdy i fałszu, która podpowiada idee i obrazy świadczące o płodnej wartości tej dychotomii. Opis przykładów postrzeganych jako węzły robocze stanowi refleksję nad architekturą jako dziełem sztuki, a tym samym nad jej wartością i znaczeniem formalnym. Przy takim podejściu architektura jest postrzegana jako metoda otwarta na złożoność i swobodnie przyjmująca przeciwstawne formy. Ukryta prawda współlistnieje z jej własną *poiesis*.

Słowa kluczowe: prawda, oszustwo, ukryte, odkryte

1. INTRODUCTION

What is true? And what is fake?

According to Schopenhauer, tearing the veil of Maya we will be able to see what lays beyond illusion, what we believe to be the truth.

Heraclitus claims that nature loves to hide, and that the task of the wise is to bring to light the being, a concept which is at the root of Western history.

Therefore, seeking truth means experiencing its own hiding, so that it requires awareness and knowledge of reality, in order to make this unveiling possible.

Truth in its deep sense is somehow opposite to the Latin word *veritas*, whose meaning is faith, in a broad sense: i.e. something assertive that we must accept as absolute and conform to an objective reality. Truth, in fact, does not mean adherence or conformity to defined rules and preconceptions.

Looking at a famous painting by Van Gogh, Heidegger speaks about the inner truth of a pair of shoes “that which is” and claims what is the essence of an artwork is the opening of the entity in its own being, becoming an event of the truth. Consequently, the image is

not a model-dependent copy, but an original, peculiar presence. By virtue of the artwork, the pair of shoes comes to be in the light of its being. The Greek word *ἀλήθεια* – composed of *a*-privative and *letho* (hiddenness) – akin to Heidegger's dynamic of unveiling (opening) and hiding (closing), clearly underlies the concept of truth. If the non-hidden is the enlightened darkness that instantly unveils what has not been forgotten, then it can be deducted that the truth is not a simple non-hiding, freed from every hindrance. If this were possible, the unhidden being would no longer be itself. He therefore concludes that truth, in its very essence, is not truth.

Moreover, following up Heidegger reasoning on the sense of truth – which is also non-truth – does it not follow that it is precisely the true space that measures artwork, revealing its most proper being?

Therefore, in the pursuit of true space, great attention should be paid in the character of figures, and in ordering and disposing them. The comings and goings of light and shadow, an artifice put in place thanks to Le Corbusier's fake thickness of Ronchamp walls, or the signifying void between uncovered and covered, that is not to be intended as a lack, but as playing a fundamental role in Mies's Barcelona pavilion, arouse our interest. They are eloquent metaphors of opposing elements, somehow distant from the constructive sincerity of modern language, conceptual devices, which generate – each with its own forms, regardless of use or construction techniques – multiple or fragmentary attributions of meaning. They are examples of continuous variations of meaning still involving our sensitivity.

The truth of deception turns out to be a process, a montage that provides us an endless learning. Using a term dear to Walter Benjamin, the most heartfelt architecture is made by observing and reflecting on the character of an artifact in relation to place and history, a way of playing with the relationship between perception and space. Respect for materials – a concept which goes beyond the sincerity of the construction – should therefore involve also architecture character.

2. THE GOOD DECEPTION

From what has been said, common sense of truth-not-truth is a complex and constantly changing concept. The relationship between man and space has changed through time and it is now fading. World seems to have become quite uninhabitable. Let's think about what seems to have the most sense of non-truth: artifice. The word artifice comes from the Latin *artificium*, as signifying both the mastery of an art, and a trick or something intended to deceive to obtain effects different to the immediate aspect of things, i.e. non-natural. Today artifice has a negative meaning, in opposition to the beauty of nature. It is therefore not surprising that the landscape is perceived as real.

What is the truth-not-truth relationship in architecture today?

Is it possible to imagine an architecture that allows us to see beyond or behind, by making spaces available to a poetic and playful dimension?

Facing the accumulation of different languages, objects, visions, all resulting from the current impossibility to determine the construction of a proven plan of legitimacy – to distinguish what can be done from what must not be done – the Venice Biennale 2014 has offered a reflection on the fundamentals in architecture during the last century. The curator, Rem

Koolhaas, brought attention to the elements, the narrative details of the structural parts, such as windows, façades, balconies, corridors, stairs, etc.

In his way, Peter Eisenman preferred to go back to the roots of Andrea Palladio, the classical architect *par excellence*. Aldo Rossi, Antonio Monestiroli and many other architects, like Le Corbusier and Mies before them, have shown a deep interest in Palladio's work, that deals with the poetic discourse, grounded on history, but free from preconceptions – such as functionalism, constructive sincerity, etc. – and with the coexistence of rational and abstract character in architecture.

This is clearly evident by looking at the famous Villa Rotunda, which embodies Palladio's idea of architecture, its abstract content, the generalizing potential of invisible regulatory traces and possible aggregations. A circle, the diagrammatic development, is at the same time inscribed in a square, the internal divisions obeying proportional rules. This cubic volume hides a large circular void, the central room. The villa has no functional content. This is evidenced in the large dome, designed to become a symbol of *grandeur*, as well as in its mathematics, sequences of geometric forms, hierarchies and light density, pressures.

On each side of the cube, Ionic columns and a temple podium. Palladio is here contradicting every preconception and illusion. Hiding structure, using ornament to deceive, with no concern for the truth of the material, as in the painted architecture of ancient Roman houses. No hierarchy between main and secondary facade. Fronts are indifferent to orientation. The extraneousness to the context accentuates the contrasting relationship that the villa establishes with the place.

The architectural assembling of the Rotunda is amazing. Le Corbusier describes it as *l'espace indicible*, to define the mainly architectural emotion that one feels in front of this masterpiece, successful in every aspect, in its maximum intensity, proportion, quality of execution.

The central plan building is a device for looking. Landscape is brought inside and at the same time it is proposed as an object to be seen. To reinforce the self-referential and perfect mechanics of the central plan, the artificial treatment of the ground creates a perfect, raised horizontal plane. The basement of the Rotunda is the reason and the pretext to emphasize the articulation of plan and section. The juxtaposition of potentially conflicting elements makes the Rotunda a suitable building, perceived as context completion, which is ideal and real at the same time.

An attitude that the Rotunda shares with other central plan masterpieces, such as Le Corbusier's Ville Savoye, which is not dealing with its immediate surroundings, but connecting programmatically with a conceptual landscape, building a sort of virtual isolation all around. The *fenêtre en longueur* acquires an ideological substance, in which the view stretches to the horizon. In this sense it is therefore comparable with Palladio's view from the fronts, with temple columns and symmetrical windows. This concept interprets the reality of landscape and connects architecture more directly to its specific characters. The white plaster skin removes any constructive reference to Le Corbusier's volume. This ambiguity attracts our attention and produces minimal and continuous shifting, subtly contradicting our expectations as observers.

The actions that Rotunda suggests spin freely (the house is not a true house), making both myth and dream visible, while opening the space to a playful dimension. Its fundamental poetic character lays in the possibility of being 'inhabited', used (and copied halfway around the world) and at the end even abandoned.

In this sense Palladio's Four Books can be compared to a poetic work, thus resisting differently from architecture to the wear and tear of time, and realizing in the most vivid way the transmission of his thought, since nothing but thought is transmissible.

2.1 FERTILE OXYMORS

It is impossible to establish the belonging to a nexus, a continuity of measurement, a community's shared understanding among multiple meanings.

The circularity of dichotomies – a logical subdivision in which neither is without the other – acquires a particular relevance in contemporary project, whose nominal operation doesn't exclude anything, determining at the same time the possibility of multiple choices.

The sign is obviously central, the unveiled sign carries in itself its own rules, keeping a distance from the traditional order. As Kandinsky theorized, type becomes sign for sign, text for text, art for art, silent symbols to the signifier, capable of becoming an artwork. The structure of a work of art and, even more so, its formal value, become meaningful.

If we associate, as an example, a monumental image of the Venice Grand Canal with an icy road, we obtain a first cognitive category within a logical and unrealistic paradox, and a second cognitive category strongly surrealistic and unveiling. Two innovative images with new configurative scenarios. The iced Canal opens to vague and fertile imaginations, that could be linked for example to the idea of climate change. This free association suddenly turns the stable, perennial and meaningful structure of the image and collective memory of the lagoon city, into an unstable one. Venice becomes an active material available for new spatial configurations: an underwater city – if water rises, an ice city if climate will undergo a reversal.

Images of possible cities contrast with images of city-memory. Mixing up opposites, determines the arbitrariness of this reading. The circularity of dichotomies is a descriptive, questionable facet of project complexity. It holds enough interchangeability, vagueness and ambiguity to allow a free, associative fertile approach, a generative methodology in which different and antithetical forms, artificial and natural, can coexist.

This operation clearly expresses the dissemination of meaning operated by imagination. As John Keats claims, what the imagination perceives as beauty is also true. The greater and arbitrary is the free association of two elements, the most it opens to multiple meanings.

Within a linear system of cause and effect, architecture has accustomed us to rules and manuals, theories of architectural language – not least Le Corbusier's *Modulor* – which underly the attribution of truth in the making of artifacts and places.

The Modern, with its intelligible preconceptions inserted within a rational logic of the space – open, white, objective, exposed, clean, free, luminous, essential, simple, abstract, functional, technical, repeatable – has excluded and condemned to oblivion a whole world of 'improper' elements, such as closed, black, subjective, hidden, decorated, busy, shady, complex, figurative, dysfunctional. These elements have long time been banned as fictitious and deceiving.

Nonetheless, complex thought has sometimes overturned these reductionist criteria, opening new perspectives on the global reality of man and his worldview. Russian theory of constructivism and, what is more important, deconstructivism philosophy, have thoroughly questioned rationalist thought. Lyotard conceives modernity as something for which there are

no alternatives, if not illogical randomness, while Derrida sees just one possibility for building: deconstructing, making *tabula rasa* of paradigms of vertical and determinist control. The dialectic between construction and deconstruction establishes a new theory of architecture, expressed by architects Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman, whose architectural manifesto at Vitra Campus in Basel are proposed as generative short circuits. From Gehry's fragmented *non-finito* to Hadid's dynamic suprematism, the alphabet of architecture is no longer included in a shared grammar, a system of rules that rises a code of belonging. Order and chaos are the new order, coexisting in architecture, without apparent contradiction.

2.2 REQUIRED DECEIT

Thus, architecture is neither true nor false. Its task is to be open to perception and to the possibility of being inhabited. In this regard, architecture has the ability to signify and control space, time and bodies all through construction.

Traditionally, architecture has assumed the characteristic of the formal values of tectonics, which is the art of building in an orderly, solid and permanent way.

The poetic of modernity has twisted the value paradigm of beauty by using some concepts, dense with figurative energies. Weightlessness is one of the main concepts as much as skeleton-cladding, nudity-decoration, opacity-transparency.

Sincerity-deception in construction is another dichotomy which, for example, is very evident in Berlin National Gallery, in which Mies van der Rohe carries out the architectural order of ancient temples by using large suspended steel spans.

The building has equal facades, with no main orientation. The large square roof, consisting of thin crossed beams, gives the illusion of a classical Renaissance ceiling. The roof thickness leans on eight pillars, symmetrically arranged, two on each side of the squared plan, while the corners without structure give the impression that a heavy tray is floating in the void, and the glass façade gives the sense of an open temple cell. The eight slender pillars below the flat roof do not limit the space.

The free volume opens to a new perceptive experience. Inside this pure void, motion is not determined by any preferential axis. Far from any functional necessity, the 'temple' admits any practice. Inner and outer space are blended by using glass. The vision of city's fragmented landscape provides depth to the void. The illogically heavy roof and the wide void generate at the same time a sense of stability and unsteadiness, a value of contemporary architecture, that allows lightness by composing its elements.

The 'temple' takes constructive tensions to the limit.

Where the stresses of the building are concentrated – which the ancients once absorbed and hid by using capitals and basements – Mies inserts small spherical caps, in order to provide an illusion of no contact between the elements of the steel construction system.

The 'temple' seems therefore not to touch the ground, floating over a base which Mies designed according to an opposite concept. In fact, the museum-being is declined in a much more traditional way, consisting in a basement of reinforced concrete, almost completely opaque, with just an opening, facing the sculpture garden.

Steel – a material beloved by Mies – needs to be coated to be fire resistant, so that also Gallery pillars are coated. What we see is actually only an enlarged illusion of the underlying skeleton. Even the iron structure of six pillars of the main front and four of the side façades of New York Seagram, is clad.

In the *Lamp of truth*, it is claimed that there is always a certain degree of ‘deceiving’ in architecture. Architects are not obliged to highlight the structure, nor to hide it. Even the outer surface of the human body hides much of its structure, but following John Ruskin, there is nothing worse than introducing elements and structures functionless, artificially inadequate. In his opinion, architects should not betray materials, i.e. deception is allowed only with the material consent, and every material seems to bring its own form. Mies perfectly knows how to work with the truth of steel, as Palladio does with the truth of masonry.

2.3 NATURAL VS ARTIFICIAL

Building in stone, with stone, inside a mountain, outside a mountain, being inside a mountain. Peter Zumthor’s attempt in Vals Baths, is to give the project an architectural interpretation, guided by this chain of words, giving it a shape. In the large stone volume, pierced by cavities, space is qualified by opposite elements, such as light/darkness, reflection/opacity, as well as by the sound of water on the surface. Inside, a sequence of geometric holes, made up of large compact vertical blocks, arranged according to a perceptible spatial order.

The monolithic solidity of the volume is a truth-not truth. In fact, it is emptied, and even the massive pillars are hollow inside, and construction features a dressed wall. Thin, superimposed stone elements constitute a strong thickness for reinforced concrete walls, and this structural co-participation between concrete core and stone face is deeply emotional and sensitive.

From natural to artificial, the cladding of the building defines the main character of the construction, being at one with the image and with the sense. It conveys the intentions, loading itself with meanings and memories.

Therefore, we can say that even semantic value admits the constructive deception. Following Goethe’s thought, we could say that it is not always necessary for the true to take shape, it is sufficient that it hovers around the surroundings, as a spirit.

The Danteum is a plastic fact of absolute value, spiritually bound to the criteria of Dante’s composition.

While structuring its form, architecture should appropriately develop a theme. In this regard, Terragni’s layout is fundamental, and it is all played out on the proportions of the walls, the rooms, the ceilings, the stairs and the light changing effects. The hidden truth of architecture is revealed by the plan.

Terragni manages to generate a sense of spiritual amazement. Starting from the first room of the rectangular floor plan of the building, all the choices are made and the weights are distributed into the built form. The rectangular plan of the ‘Hell’s room’ is divided into a series of squares, gradually decreasing in size. At the center of each square there is a column, and each column carries a part of the ceiling, made up of blocks. The pillars have proportional thicknesses, according to the weight they bear, and seem to be disorderly arranged. But by joining the center of the squares the artifice is suddenly revealed: a virtual spiral holds the elements together. The separated blocks of the ceiling and the slits of rough light suggest the feeling of emptiness. According to a precise order, through the different rooms the layout articulates the narrative using sequential spaces and hierarchies. By analyzing with critical spirit – the same that every expert in architectural composition has – no logical passage is left suspended or silent in this project. The represented image of this architecture really manages to express the mood and the terrifying beauty of this

purification journey, even if the artifice put in place to obtain this truth, remains hidden into the most hidden.

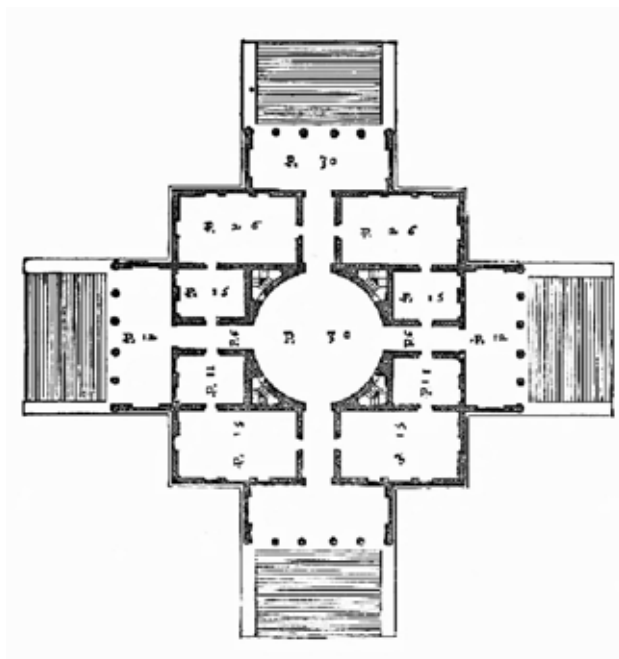
3. CONCLUSIONS

The architectural project is the only certainty. A fluid, poetic practice, that freely plays with antithetical concepts, and cancels out different meanings, in close relationship between truth and un-truth. Thus, architectural forms originate from continuous dialectics of opposites, between artifice and nature. Forms-figures give living its own character.

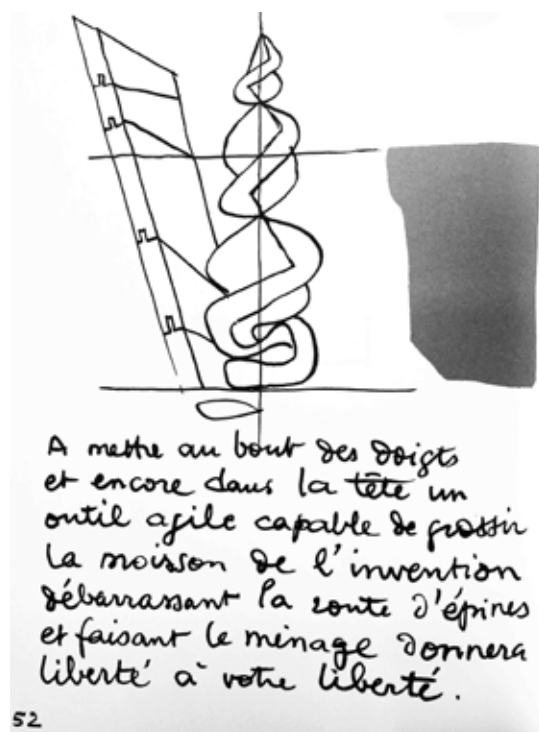
The only art where you cannot lie or pretend, in which you cannot make the false in the conceptual sense, is architecture. Its image corresponds to different ideas of 'beauty' – lightness, heaviness, solidity, instability, etc. – but it always deals with the ability to properly carry out a theme. In the search for truth, architecture is memory, archetype, myth. Its meaning, the hidden truth, is linked to the rationality of the methodological approach, as well as to the extreme consequences of the irrational, to which every artistic phenomenon is fatally attracted.



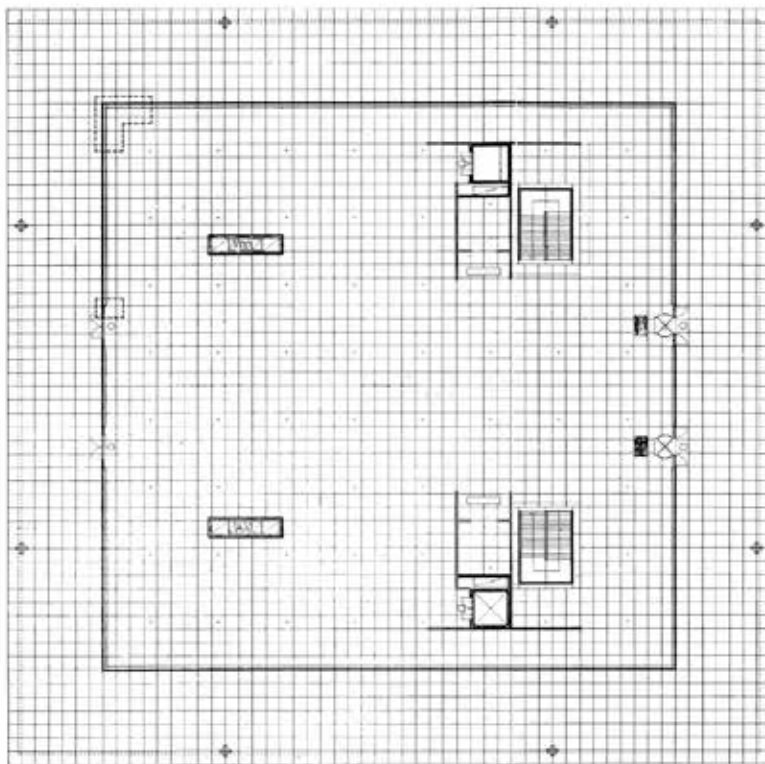
Ill. 1. Marcel Duchamp, *Porte simple au lieu de deux portes*, 1927



III. 2. Andrea Palladio, *Plan of the Villa Rotonda*, from *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, 1570



III. 3. Le Corbusier, *B2 Esprit* from *Le poème de l'angle droit*, 1955



Ill. 4. Mies van der Rohe, *Plan of the Neue Nationalgalerie*, 1968, from *Atlas of places*

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