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THE SEARCH FOR THE *EPISTÈME*: THE RELATIVE TRUTHS AND LIES OF OUR TIME

POSZUKIWANIE *EPISTEME*: WZGLĘDNE PRAWDY I KŁAMSTWA NASZYCH CZASÓW

Abstract

Plato identifies the truth with the *epistème*, a form of absolute and unchanging knowledge, a concept that had a decisive influence also on the 20th century architecture. If the ideologies of the twentieth century have produced partial or labile truths, postmodernity, by its very anti-ideological essence, produces lies in the form of truth. The digital world has projected architecture towards a dimension of virtual and artificial life that can be often unnatural for people. This deep human need can be the starting point in the quest for the truths of the third millennium, also in architecture.

Keywords: truths, beauty, episteme, new humanism

Streszczenie

Platon utożsamia prawdę z *episteme*, formą absolutnej i niezmiennej wiedzy, pojęciem, które wywarło decydujący wpływ również na architekturę XX wieku. Podczas gdy ideologie dwudziestego wieku wytworzyły częściowe lub nietrwałe prawdy postmodernizm, z racji swojej skrajnie antyideologicznej istoty, tworzy kłamstwa w postaci prawdy. Świat cyfrowy przeniósł architekturę do wymiaru wirtualnego i sztucznego życia, które dla samych ludzi bywa często nienaturalne. Ta głęboka ludzka potrzeba może być punktem wyjścia dla poszukiwań prawd trzeciego tysiąclecia, także w architekturze.

Słowa kluczowe: prawdy, piękno, episteme, nowy humanizm

For St. Thomas Aquinas, a Christian philosopher and theologian, beauty is the splendor of truth and depends on the perfect correspondence of matter to form. A transcendental vision that has influenced thinkers and artists for centuries. Among them there is also Leon Battista Alberti, who imagines beauty as the sum of all parts working together in such a way that the addition or elimination of even one of them would alter the whole.

A theory founded in the *nihil addi* principle, a criterion of exactness specular to the very idea of truth.

But truth and beauty, although complementary concepts, have nevertheless a different nature: truth is abstract and absolute whereas beauty has a degree of ineffability, linked to the perceptual and emotional dimension of man. This is precisely the dimension referred to by the French writer Stendhal when he defines beauty as a *promise of happiness*. An aphorism whose meaning we find in the definition coming from Edoardo Persico who defines architecture as the substance of things hoped for.

It is Plato who identifies the truth with the *epistème*, a form of absolute and unchanging knowledge, opposed to the appearance of the phenomenal reality.

An idea expressed by the philosopher in *The Republic* through the metaphor of *the myth of the cave*, a place where a group of prisoners perceive external reality through deceptive shadows, projected inside by the sunlight.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato again narrates the genesis of the cosmos through a structure of numbers and represents the essence of the natural elements of the world – fire, earth, air, water and ether – through five regular polyhedra: the tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, icosahedron and dodecahedron.

The representation of the order of the cosmos through geometry is not an exclusive prerogative of Greek culture. As the Indian architect Charles Correa recalls: “Since according to Vedic thought, the world we see is only part of our existence, the forms and events we perceive are significant merely to the extent that they help us understand the non-manifest layers that lie beneath. Hence the magic diagrams, the yantras that explain the true nature of the cosmos. Of these, the vastu-purusha mandalas form the basis of architecture. Thus, buildings are conceived as model of the cosmos – no less!”¹.

According to the Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino, the Platonic idea of mathematics and geometry as absolute knowledge influences all European architectural culture. The buildings of the Western tradition, he says, are geometric mathematical configurations of the space, and therefore symbols of the Greek-Christian *epistème*. The philosopher identifies a discontinuity in the concept of *raumgestaltung*, theorized in the nineteenth century by the German art historian August Schmarsow, according to whom, the conformation of space is determined no longer by an immutable idea, but by the movement of man and therefore by the life’s becoming. A concept that had a decisive influence on the 20th-century architecture. For Severino, the spatial freedom of the Loosian *raumplan* or the *plan libre* of the Modern Movement, freed from the epistemic idea of geometry and mathematics, expresses then a condition that is different from those expressed in the past². This analysis allows us to better understand how since the 1920s of the last century a paradoxical reversal of the archetypal idea of domestic space has been rooted in the collective imagination.

Bernard Huet clearly grasps this passage maintaining that Le Corbusier speaks of the house through five negative principles opposed to the common idea of home: to those who imagine a house rooted in the ground with cellar and basement, Le Corbusier proposes *pilotis*; the *plan libre* for the walls; terrace and garden for the roof and for the window, façade libre and *fenetre en longueur*³.

In the work of the masters of the Modern Movement the foundation of the Platonic mathematical and geometric order remains the genetic code of Western architecture. Sometimes in implicit form, in other cases in programmatic and experimental form, as in the *Modulor*.

In a drawing, published in *Vers une Architecture*, Le Corbusier represents the monuments of ancient Rome through geometric solids and enunciates his famous definition: “Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light. Our eyes are made to see forms in light; light and shade reveal these forms; cubes, cones, spheres,

¹ C. Correa, *A Place In The Shade. The New Landscape & Other Essays*, Charles Correa Foundation, Panaji 2003, p. 42.

² Cf. E. Severino, *Tecnica e architettura*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2003.

³ Cf. B. Huet, *Anachroniques d'architecture*, cit. in B. Reichlin, *La casa unifamiliare al Weissenhof* [in:] C. Palazzolo, R. Vio (eds.), *Sulle tracce di Le Corbusier*, Arsenale, Venezia 1989.

cylinders or pyramids are the great primary forms which light reveals to advantage; the image of these is distinct and tangible within us and without ambiguity. It is for that reason that these are *beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms*”⁴.

So, sunlight, the very essence of the becoming of the phenomenal world, reveals the truth and beauty of forms.

The assertive search for truth evolves through a complex process and a continuous shift in design strategies. In villa Savoye, Le Corbusier assumes the symmetry and centrality of the square together with the identity of the four fronts as a reference for the composition: the reference to Villa Capra di Palladio appears evident. The truth of these compositional principles is paradoxically reaffirmed by their partial negation: the static centrality of the square is denied by the directionality of the ramp and by the dynamic perception of the *promenade architecturale*. The external envelope does not coincide with the internal space: the four fronts, only apparently the same, envelop in the same way both the internal spaces and the open space of the courtyard. The search for truth always pursues new paths: after the purist experiments of the 1920s, the Swiss master reinterprets forms and languages of the tradition (maison Errazuris, villa de Mandrot and maison in Mathes). His expressive research uses different materials and techniques: from reinforced concrete to steel, from stone or brick walls, to wood, to beaten earth; from the *béton brut*, to the tensile structure of the pavilion Philips in Brussels or the steel and glass structure of the Maison de l'Homme in Zurich.

The variety of techniques used by Le Corbusier reveals the idea that each discovery in the construction field adds a new expressive wherewithal without excluding that already acquired. The truth of one's time is a dynamic truth which consists in the ability to interpret the expressive potential of a material, of a construction system, be it archaic or just experienced.

Another master of the Modern Movement, Mies van der Rohe, carries out a radical process of abstraction of form. Through the representation of the expressive character of the structure and the reference to the archetypes of living (the yard and the roof), he investigates a universal dimension of the architectural space.

As for Le Corbusier, the search for truth is a complex process also for Mies: if in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, the void takes its shape in an unobstructed space, defined by the coffered structure of the black roof, in a clear tectonic relationship between pillar and roof, in the Barcelona Pavilion the relationship is made ambiguous by the partitions that seem to support the roof, although they have no structural function. In the Farnsworth house the pillars, outside the roof, don't denote, anymore, the supportive function.

Beyond the idea of functionalism, which runs out at the very moment of its assertive enunciation, the masters of the twentieth century, from Loos to Le Corbusier and Mies, seek their own truth through a process of formal and expressive reduction to reach the threshold of silence, of the Swiss master's *espace indicible*, which refers to the “unspeakability” of beauty and therefore of truth. An antithetical dimension to the emotional vocation of the language that we call kitsch, a recognized lie that, as Milan Kundera says, is part of the human condition: “That song moves her, but she does not take her emotion seriously. He knows very well that song is a beautiful lie. [...] Because none of us is a superman capable of escaping entirely from Kitsch. However strong our contempt, Kitsch is part of the human condition”⁵.

The crisis of the Modern Movement leads us to rethink the relationship between man and his environment. Think, for example, of the positions of the Team X group in the 1950s

⁴ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New architecture*, Dover, New York 1986, p. 29.

⁵ M. Kundera, *L'insostenibile leggerezza dell'essere*, Adelphi, Milano 1985, p. 120.

and 1960s, their new idea of habitat and the overcoming of the ideological positions of the CIAM. Or think of the emblematic controversy between Reyner Banham and Ernesto Nathan Rogers in 1959 on the new trends in Italian architecture. From this moment on, the truths of the *espace indicible* and *less is more* will no longer be a reference for the most attentive architects of postmodernity. New truths are sought, based on the narrative value and on the contamination of the language. The text by Robert Venturi *Complexity and contradiction in architecture* published in 1966 is emblematic in this sense.

If the ideologies of the twentieth century have produced partial or labile truths, postmodernity, by its very anti-ideological essence, produces lies in the form of truth.

This condition, so widespread in our time, is based on the substantial rejection of architecture as a civil and collective expression. What prevails, in the best-case scenario, is a self-referential vision of the form that generates only transitory and individual truths entrusted to inspiration and fantasy.

Already in 1954 in his book *Survival through design*, Richard Neutra reminded us of a vision of architecture as a discipline necessary for the survival of mankind, a theme that is still relevant. As the young Italian philosopher Leonardo Caffò writes in one of his recent *pamphlets* on the post-Covid 19: “[...] planning is an essential movement of speciation: architects, designers, philosophers and scientists, doctors and farmers are all involved in the design of what will become the world we will inhabit”⁶.

Caffò clarifies how the Covid has brought about a paradigm shift in the existence of man and he wishes for a new social commitment that allows the adaptation of the human species to the new environmental conditions.

This is a point of view far from certain paradoxes in which architecture deliberately seems to renounce any ethical principle and tends to aspire only to a more ephemeral media success that, in the end, relegates architecture to very diverse areas, such as design and fashion.

In his latest book, *Six Memos for the next Millennium*, published posthumously in 1988, Italo Calvino collects a cycle of five lectures that he was due to deliver in the United States⁷. The themes of the lectures on *Lightness*, *Quickness*, *Exactitude*, *Visibility*, *Multiplicity* and *Consistency* (which was to be the six) constitute, in the writer's idea, paradigms for the third millennium and represent (with the exception of *Exactitude* and *Consistency*) a reference for the contemporary architectural research. Some of these lectures allow us to unveil the dominant lies in the architecture of our time.

In the name of a misinterpreted sense of the values of *lightness* and *visibility*, architecture tends more and more to dematerialize itself, thus denying its own nature which is founded on that singular balance – as Georg Simmel said – between heavy matter passively opposed to pressure, and the formative spirituality that pushes upwards⁸. The formal structure of architecture is reduced to the appearance of the envelope.

In certain architectural paradoxes, lightness and nature are only self-referential metaphors in which the imaginative dimension prevails over the inventive one: kitsch architecture, for instance, does not mirror the reality of the time but slides into its parody. Buildings take the

⁶ Cf. L.Caffò, *Dopo il Covid-19: Punti per una discussione*, Nottetempo, Milano 2020.

⁷ Cf. I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1988.

⁸ Cf. G. Simmel, *Die Ruine* [in:] G. Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essays*, Klinkhardt, Leipzig 1911.

shape of clouds and stand up thanks to tons of steel, constructions are shaped into the form of recreated nature: oxymorons marked by a distorted idea of sustainability that from the point of view of the ecological footprint and management costs is absolutely unsustainable. As Alberto Campo Baeza argues: “for example those who can’t discuss nature in architecture unless it involves sustainability or planting vegetables on buildings. Such architects are like owners of the organic restaurants that have popped up all over New York: everything that’s not organic, they say, kills”⁹.

The *quickness* and *multiplicity* of the digital world have projected architecture towards a dimension of virtual and artificial life that can be congenial to a scientist or an engineer but is often unnatural for everyone else. As the Italian writer Alessandro Baricco argues in a lucid analysis of contemporaneity¹⁰, people need humanism, they need to continue to feel themselves as human beings. This deep human need can be the starting point in the quest for the truths of the third millennium, also in architecture.

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⁹ A.C. Baeza, *Principia architettonica [On Architecture]*, Mairela Libros, Madrid 2013, p. 84.

¹⁰ Cf. A. Baricco, *The Game*, Einaudi, Torino 2018.