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FRANCESCO SAVERIO FERA
ORCID: 0000-0001-9109-1005
University of Bologna, Italy

ARCHITECTURE AND TECHNOLOGY, A PROBLEMATIC DIALOGUE

ARCHITEKTURA I TECHNOLOGIA, PROBLEMATYCZNY DIALOG

Abstract

The text investigates the relationship between architecture and technology as inseparable terms but often not understood in their real terminological dimension. It is a problematic and controversial relationship. Through the analysis of some of the main protagonists of the world of architecture and Western culture, a research is outlined that places its assumptions on the distinction between technology and *teckné* (in ancient Greek τέχνη). A word that synthetically brings together both theoretical knowledge and the practical skills necessary to carry out a specific activity.

Keywords: architecture, technology, tekné

Streszczenie

Tekst bada relację między architekturą a technologią jako pojęciami nierozłącznymi, lecz często niezrozumianymi w ich rzeczywistej terminologicznym wymiarze. Jest to relacja problematyczna i kontrowersyjna. Poprzez analizę niektórych z głównych protagonistów świata architektury i kultury zachodniej, zarysowana zostaje badawcza refleksja, która opiera się na rozróżnieniu między technologią a *teckné* (w starożytnej grece τέχνη). Słowo to syntetycznie łączy wiedzę teoretyczną i praktyczne umiejętności niezbędne do wykonania określonego działania.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, technologia, tekné

The intersection of architecture, technology, *tekné* and humanism is a crucial theme in the history of culture and art. Reflection on how these dimensions integrate has influenced not only the design of buildings and structures, but also the critical thinking and literature that accompanies their development.

Architecture is an art form that has always reflected the humanistic and cultural values of society. During the Renaissance, architecture was seen as the embodiment of the "human measure", a central concept for humanist thinkers. Leon Battista Alberti, a 15th-century architect and theorist, considered architecture as a moral and civil act, emphasizing the importance of the harmonious relationship between man and the surrounding environment.

The idea that architecture can elevate the human soul, improve social and cultural life, has been central in different historical periods. Great public or sacred buildings, such as medieval cathedrals or Renaissance squares, were designed to create a shared experience, in

which beauty and functionality were combined with cultural symbolism. Thus, the concept of *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, has been a recurring theme in humanistic and contemporary architectural reflection, with the belief that buildings should respect and enhance the environmental and social context. The concept of *genius loci*, which literally means "spirit of the place", has deep roots in antiquity and has been revived and reinterpreted in the Renaissance and modern eras[1], especially within humanism. This concept is not only about the physical geography of a place, but its unique character and the soul that defines it, integrating natural, architectural, cultural and symbolic elements. In humanistic contexts, *genius loci* becomes a guide to understand and respect the specific characteristics of a place, recognizing its value and connection with man and his experience. In ancient Rome, the *genius loci* was a minor deity or guardian spirit associated with a specific place. Every place, whether a house, a city or a natural landscape, had its own genius, a sacred entity that guarded its essence and regulated its destiny. It was a way of explaining the personality of places, an acknowledgement of the power and sacredness of nature and the surrounding environment. During the Renaissance, humanism recovered the concept of *genius loci* within a broader vision of man as the measure of all things. Renaissance humanism placed the harmonious relationship between man and the environment in which he lived at the center of philosophical and artistic thought, recognizing that every place had its own unique identity, which influenced human culture and life. This connection with the place was seen as a source of inspiration for art, literature and architecture. An indicative example of how the concept of *genius loci* was interpreted by humanists is represented by the work of Leon Battista Alberti. In his treatise *De re aedificatoria*[2], Alberti emphasizes the importance of context and environment in designing buildings. For Alberti, a good architectural project cannot ignore the characteristics of the place in which it is built. He spoke of the need to harmonize buildings with the landscape and the surrounding natural conditions, a concept that reflects respect for the *genius loci*. Architecture, according to Alberti, should be not only an artistic and technical expression but also a moral and civil work, capable of improving the life of man while respecting the place and its spirit. Humanist poets and writers, such as Francesco Petrarca, also explored the concept of *genius loci*, especially in their relationship with nature and places. In the famous letter describing his ascent of Mount Ventoux[3], Petrarca does not limit himself to describing the physical landscape, but reflects on the connection between the human soul and the environment. The mountain becomes not only a physical place, but also a symbol of the inner journey and spiritual elevation. For humanists, landscapes and natural places were not simply passive backdrops for human activities, but significant spaces, charged with spiritual and symbolic value. The *genius loci*, in this context, is the invisible

[1] Cf. C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York 1979. The Author takes up the concept of genius loci to explore the idea that architecture must respond to the character of the place, creating a dialogue between the built space and the natural and cultural environment. For him, architecture must not only be a functional construction, but must be able to express the essence of a place, respecting its identity and amplifying its meaning.

[2] L.B. Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, Nicolò di Lorenzo Alemanno (editio princeps), Firenze 1485 [in:] L.B. Alberti, *L'Architettura*, G. Orlandi (ed.), Il Polifilo, Milano 1966.

[3] F. Petrarca, *A Dionigi da San Sepolcro dell'ordine di Sant'Agostino e professore della Sacra Pagina. Sui propri affanni*, also known as *Ascesa al monte Ventoso*, it is a letter written in Latin and collected in the *Familiares* (IV, 1), 1336.

force that binds man to the surrounding world, suggesting a deep and complex relationship between nature and human experience.

TECHNOLOGY OR *TEKNÉ*?

With the advent of the industrial age and, later, the digital age, technology has had an increasing impact on architecture. Reinforced concrete, steel, glass and, more recently, digital and sustainable technologies have enabled the creation of projects that challenge traditional physical limits. The influence of technology was particularly evident in the Modern Movement and Rationalism, with figures such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, who saw architecture as a machine for living, where functionality and efficiency were central.

The architectural literature of this period reflects a rationalist approach, in which aesthetics are subordinated to constructive logic and functional efficiency. In this context, technology is seen as a means to liberate architecture from the restrictions of the past and create a new social order based on modernity.

Perhaps more than technology, when speaking of architectural composition, we should refer to the concept of *tekné* as understood in the classical context, trying to clarify the misunderstanding that is often created between technology and the Greek concept of *tekné* (τέχνη). In fact, the term *tekné* and technology are related but distinct concepts, and their understanding reveals a lot about the different conceptions of the relationship between human knowledge, art and technical production.

The Greek word *tekné* has a very broad and profound meaning, which can be translated as art, skill or technical competence. In ancient Greece, *tekné* indicated both theoretical knowledge and the practical skills necessary to carry out a certain activity, which could be artistic, artisanal or scientific. Plato and Aristotle used the term to refer to practical knowledge oriented to a goal, distinguishing it from other forms of knowledge such as episteme (theoretical or scientific knowledge) and *doxa* (opinion).

For Aristotle, *tekné* was a form of applied knowledge, knowledge that involved doing (poiesis) and that followed rational principles for the production of an object or a concrete result[4]. For example, the ability of an architect to design a building, or that of a doctor to cure an illness, were considered forms of *tekné*. In short, *tekné* brings together theoretical knowledge and practice. It has a specific purpose, oriented towards the production of an object or the completion of an action that requires manual and intellectual ability based on precise rules and techniques.

The term technology derives from *tekné*, but has taken on a different and more limited meaning over time. With the advent of the modern era, especially during the Industrial Revolution, the word "technology" began to refer increasingly to industrial and mechanical processes, machines and applied sciences that improved the capacity to produce and transform matter.

Today, technology is understood as the set of scientific and technical knowledge applied to the creation of tools, processes and systems that serve to solve practical problems or satisfy human needs. It is distinguished from classical *tekné* by the emphasis on scientific and engineering development, which is often based on the automation and specialization of

[4] Cf. G. Lombardi, *A scuola da Aristotele leggendo Platone*, Studium, Roma 2022.

skills. So, schematically speaking, technology is oriented towards optimizing processes and solving large-scale problems. It has a basis strongly linked to applied sciences and industrial and digital innovations. It often focuses on the development of machinery, advanced tools and complex systems (for example, computer science, robotics, biotechnology). It promotes a high degree of specialization and automation of activities.

A crucial difference between the two concepts lies in the relationship with knowledge and production. While *tekné* implied a direct relationship between the craftsman (or artist) and his object, with a creative and manual component that led to a tangible result, modern technology tends to involve processes mediated by machinery or complex systems that can reduce personal and manual interaction.

Martin Heidegger is one of the philosophers who criticized modern technology for this very reason. In his lecture *The Question Concerning Technology* (1953)[5], Heidegger distinguishes between *tekné* and modern technology, arguing that *tekné* allowed man to reveal the world through a creative process that respected the nature of things, while modern technology tends to reduce the world to a set of resources to be exploited. Heidegger sees modern technology as a form of "enframing" (Ge-stell), a way of seeing the world that transforms it into an object to be dominated and manipulated.

Although *tekné* and technology are opposite concepts, some contemporary thinkers and practices try to bring them together in a more balanced synthesis. In some sectors, such as design, sustainable architecture or digital craftsmanship, there is an attempt to maintain the creative sensitivity and human relationship that was typical of *tekné*, using modern technologies but often losing sight of the complexity of reality.

In short, *tekné* and technology represent two ways of understanding the relationship between man and doing. *Tekné* refers to a practical and theoretical expertise, combined with a direct experience with the ideational or constructive process, in which man is at the center of the work. Technology, on the other hand, focuses on the use of advanced tools and applied sciences to solve problems more efficiently and on a large scale, but often obtaining alienating effects. However, a dialogue between the two concepts could lead to a more conscious practice, in which technological advancement does not forget the human and creative value that characterized classical *tekné*.

Today, with the introduction of advanced technologies such as BIM (Building Information Modeling), artificial intelligence and innovative materials, architecture is pushing towards increasingly complex and "original" forms. However, tensions also emerge between technological progress and human needs, as excessive mechanization can risk alienating the individual from the built environment. Sustainability and environmental impact have become fundamental themes, leading to a deeper reflection on how to integrate technology and humanism in architecture.

Humanistic theoretical knowledge plays a key role in documenting, analyzing, and theorizing new developments. From Vitruvius, with his treatise *De Architectura*[6], which inspired many Renaissance architects, to the manifestos of the 20th century, texts have always accompanied the evolution of architectural thought. Vitruvius' treatise emphasized the principles *of utilitas, firmitas*, and *venustas* (utility, stability, and beauty), which represent a sort of ethical code for architecture, values that have remained central for centuries.

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[5] M. Heidegger, *La questione della tecnica*, goWare, Firenze 2017.

[6] Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, P. Gros, A. Corso, E. Romano (eds), Einaudi, Torino 1997.

In the modern era, the work of Le Corbusier, such as Towards an Architecture, is a fundamental example of the reflection on how technology could be used to create buildings that respond to the functional needs of man, while maintaining an aesthetic ideal.

In contemporary times, artistic and architectural literature increasingly reflects an ethical concern for the relationship between man, technology, and the environment. Authors such as Aldo Rossi, for example, have underlined the importance of the phenomenological dimension of architecture[7], highlighting the risk of a too abstract and mechanical design, neglecting all human complexity. Even theorists such as Oswald Mathias Ungers, with his essays on urban space and the city[8], explore the implications of contemporary architecture oriented towards an increasingly globalized and technologically advanced world.

The dialogue between architecture, technology and humanism is a theme deeply rooted in the history of culture and art. Humanistic reflection has always tried to keep man and his needs at the center, while technology has brought new possibilities, but also new idiosyncrasies. Art literature[9] acts as a bridge between these two worlds, offering a space for critical and theoretical analysis where architecture can be interpreted not only as a technical practice, but as an art form and a reflection of the human condition.

Modern and contemporary architecture is therefore at the crossroads between technological innovation and the preservation of humanistic values, seeking to create spaces that respond to both the practical needs and the spiritual and social aspirations of humanity.

ALBERTI'S INFLUENCE AND THE RENEWAL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

In the Renaissance, architecture was perceived as a moral and civil act, an expression of humanistic thought that placed man and his relationship with space at the center of the architectural project. Leon Battista Alberti was one of the most important theorists of this vision. In his treatise *De re aedificatoria* (1452), Alberti discussed architecture extensively as a discipline that not only satisfies functional needs, but can and must elevate the human spirit. According to Alberti, architecture had to respect the "human measure", a harmonious proportion that was reflected both in the individual building and in the organization of the city. This concept was based on an anthropocentric vision of the universe, where man was considered the point of reference for the design of spaces.

One of the key aspects of Alberti's thought is the distinction between architecture and construction. For Alberti, the architect was not simply a craftsman who erected buildings, but an intellectual who conceived and designed works based on aesthetic, mathematical and philosophical principles. Architecture, therefore, was a theoretical art, while construction was the practical process of translating those theories into reality. This separation between conceptual design and practical implementation became an important basis for the evolution of architecture in the following centuries.

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[7] A. Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, Marsilio, Padova 1966.

[8] O.M. Ungers, *Architecture as Theme*, Electa, Milano 1982.

[9] J. von Schlosser Magnino, *Die Kunstliteratur*, Wien 1924 [in:] J. von Schlosser Magnino, *La letteratura artistica: manuale delle fonti della storia dell'arte moderna*, O. Kurtz (ed.), La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1996.

One of the modern authors who takes up and renews this distinction is Adolf Loos, an Austrian architect and theoretician of the late 19th and early 20th century[10]. In his famous essay *Ornament and Crime* (1908)[11], Loos criticizes the excessive decoration of buildings, arguing that architecture must be simple and functional, reducing the ornamental frills that were now considered meaningless. In this sense, Loos continues the Albertian legacy by focusing on the purity of form and the relationship between function and construction, while overturning some of the classical Renaissance ideals.

Adolf Loos fits into the context of architectural modernity, a period in which technology and industry began to play a decisive role in the design of buildings. Loos ideally continues Alberti's discourse when he attempts to establish a new relationship between aesthetics and construction, but with a renewed focus on functional and practical values. If for Alberti the harmony between man and space was linked to classical and symbolic criteria, for Loos this harmony had to be sought through functionality, the absence of superfluous decorations and the rational use of materials.

Loos considered architecture not as a simple exercise in form, but as a moral act, just like Alberti. However, his morality was expressed differently: while Alberti looked at the classical order as a vehicle for balance between man and space, Loos believed that architectural morality resided in the truth of materials and in its character.

A prime example of Loos's thinking is the building designed for Goldman & Salatsch (1910), also known as the "Looshaus" in Vienna. This building, with its austere and unadorned facade, was the subject of heated controversy, as it broke with the decorative stylistic traditions of the time. Loos, following his theoretical line, rejected any unnecessary ornament, arguing that the beauty of a building should derive from the purity of its forms and the suitability of the construction for its urban purposes.

Despite the temporal distance and the differences in context, Adolf Loos's thought can be seen as an evolution of Alberti's concept of moral architecture. Both authors see architecture as an act that must respect an ethical responsibility towards society. However, while Alberti bases this responsibility on the search for harmonious and proportionate beauty, Loos bases it on the search for sobriety. In both cases, however, architecture is seen as a civil and moral act, which cannot be reduced to a simple technical or stylistic exercise.

Furthermore, the distinction between architecture and construction in Loos indirectly recalls Alberti's teaching. Alberti emphasized the importance of the theoretical project and the intellectual vision of the architect, while Loos, while distancing himself from ornamentation, believed that the architect should be the guarantor of truth and constructive sincerity. This complex relationship between the intellectual and practical aspects of architecture continues to be central to contemporary debate, especially when considering the role of new technologies and advanced construction techniques. The link between Leon Battista Alberti and Adolf Loos highlights a continuity in architectural thought regarding the relationship between architecture and construction. Alberti, with his humanistic and moral vision of architecture, laid the foundations for a reflection that places the measure at the center a human and the harmony of space. Adolf Loos took up and reinterpreted these principles in an era of technological transformation, emphasizing the essentiality of forms and practical function as

[10] B. Rukschcio, R. Schachel, *Adolf Loos. Leben und Werk*, Residenz Verlag, Salzburg 1982.

[11] A. Loos, *Ornamento e delitto*, 1908 [in:] A. Loos, *Parole nel vuoto*, Adelphi, Milano 1972, pp. 220–222.

new criteria of architectural morality. Both, in different ways, seek to preserve the integrity of architecture as an art that must serve man and society.

THE CLASSICAL TRADITION IN MIES VAN DER ROHE

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, one of the greatest architects of the 20th century, is famous for his minimalist approach to architecture and his celebration of modernity and construction technique. However, his work is deeply rooted in the dialogue between the classical world and the new opportunities offered by the technical possibilities of his time[12]. In his work, he combines the simplicity of forms with the innovative use of modern materials. This synthesis between classical order and construction technique is central to Mies's work, managing to uniquely synthesize the relationship between classical and contemporary. Furthermore, Mies admired classical architecture for its formal clarity and the subtraction of the superfluous. Typical elements of Greek and Roman architecture, such as symmetry, proportion and the use of noble materials, were reinterpreted by Mies in a modern key through geometric rigor and the purity of industrial materials.

Although he is considered one of the pioneers of the Modern Movement, Mies van der Rohe had a deep admiration for the classical world, in particular for the idea of order and proportion. He was influenced by Greek and Roman architecture, not so much by the decorative style, but by the attention to harmony and geometry. In this sense, Mies, like Renaissance theorists such as Leon Battista Alberti, sought a balance between aesthetic order and practical functionality, which could express lasting beauty. One of the clearest examples of this influence is his famous phrase, taken from the Greek philosopher Anaximander, who proclaimed: "Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into living, mutable, new space"[13]. This idea of translating time, culture and thought into built form resonates deeply with classical architecture, which sought to express cosmic order and perfection through structure.

Mies' classicism is manifested above all in the search for balanced proportions and clarity of form. Although his buildings do not feature obvious classical decoration, such as columns or friezes, their geometric rigor, symmetry and minimalist elegance are inspired by the principles of simplicity and purity found in ancient architecture.

One of the key concepts for Mies is the concept of universal and open space, an idea that he takes from Greek temples, in which the structure blends harmoniously with the surrounding environment, leaving freedom for movement and the use of space.

He was inspired by the classical values of order and proportion, he was also fascinated by the possibilities offered by modern technology. He understood the revolutionary potential of new materials, such as steel and glass, which allowed him to create buildings with lighter and more transparent structures than in the past.

Mies was one of the main promoters of the use of modern technology in architecture, especially new materials such as glass and steel. He saw technology not only as a means to

[12] F. Neumeyer, *The Artless Word. Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1991.

[13] P. Carter, *Mies van der Rohe. An Appreciation on the Occasion This Month of His 75th Birthday*, "Architectural Design" 1961, no. 31(3), pp. 95–121.

create more efficient and lighter structures, but also as a way to express the transparency and sincerity of architecture itself.

The use of advanced technologies, such as steel structures and floor-to-ceiling glass panels, represented a break with the past and, at the same time, a form of continuity with classical architectural principles, in which clarity and order dominated formal choices. For Mies, technology was not an end in itself, but a tool to achieve an ideal of essential beauty, just as in classical architecture materials and construction techniques were used to express order and harmony.

One of the fundamental aspects of Mies's architecture is the reduction to the essential. The structure of the building had to be visible and clear, without hiding the construction process behind unnecessary ornamentation. In this, Mies followed a line of thought close to that of Adolf Loos, who had criticized excessive decoration in architecture. Mies's use of glass and steel was not only technical, but also symbolic: they embodied the transparency and lightness of the new industrial age, and at the same time expressed a kind of modern monumentality. These materials allowed Mies to create open, luminous and fluid spaces, where the boundaries between interior and exterior were blurred, as in the famous Farnsworth House (1945–1951). In this work, the building is reduced to a pure skeleton of steel and glass, which allows for a continuous relationship with the surrounding nature, recalling the idea of universal space that dates back to the classical world, but with a radically modern aesthetic.

Mies van der Rohe used technology to create a timeless architecture, capable of embodying the eternal values of proportion and clarity associated with classicism, but using modern materials and techniques. Mies van der Rohe's work is, in fact, a perfect example of the synthesis between classical tradition and modern technological innovations. While modern architecture was often interpreted as a radical break with the past, Mies succeeded in integrating elements of the classical world into a contemporary context. An example of this approach is the Barcelona Pavilion (1929). This project is considered one of Mies's most significant works[14], in which his attempt to merge the classical ideal of space and proportion with modern materials and technologies clearly emerges. The pavilion, built for the 1929 Barcelona Universal Exhibition, uses steel, glass and marble to create a space that is both fluid and monumental, respecting Mies's idea that architecture should create a calm and rational "inner universe".

The reflective glass surfaces and the placement of materials give a sense of lightness and transparency, in stark contrast to the heaviness of the classical structure, but the overall effect is the same: a sense of majesty and balance that recalls the rigor of the classical world. The pavilion has no superfluous decorations, yet its order, its proportions and the play of refined materials make it almost a modern temple.

Another eloquent example is the Farnsworth House, built between 1945 and 1951, which represents one of the highest expressions of modern architecture. The building is made almost entirely of glass and steel, with an extremely simple and clean plan, which reflects the modernist principles of transparency and lightness. However, the structure has a purity and formal clarity that evoke classical architecture, although using completely new materials.

The Farnsworth House recalls the geometric perfection and sense of order that were central to classical architecture, but Mies transforms these concepts into a space immersed in

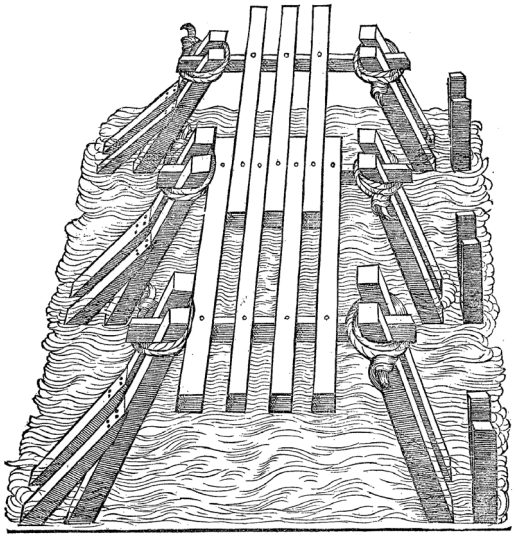
[14] I. Solà-Morales Rubió, C. Cirici, F. Ramos, *Mies van der Rohe. Barcelona Pavilion*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1993.

nature, with a transparency that allows the landscape to be experienced as part of the architecture itself. This also reflects a recurring theme in classical architecture: the harmonious connection between construction and nature.

Another key theme in Mies's work is construction as a central element of aesthetics. For him, architecture should honestly reveal its construction process, a concept that has a parallel in the classical world, where Greek and Roman temples clearly displayed their structure and materials. In Mies's work, modern technology, such as exposed steel, is not hidden, but exhibited as part of the beauty of the building. This reflects the classical idea that architectural beauty comes from truth of materials and clarity of form.

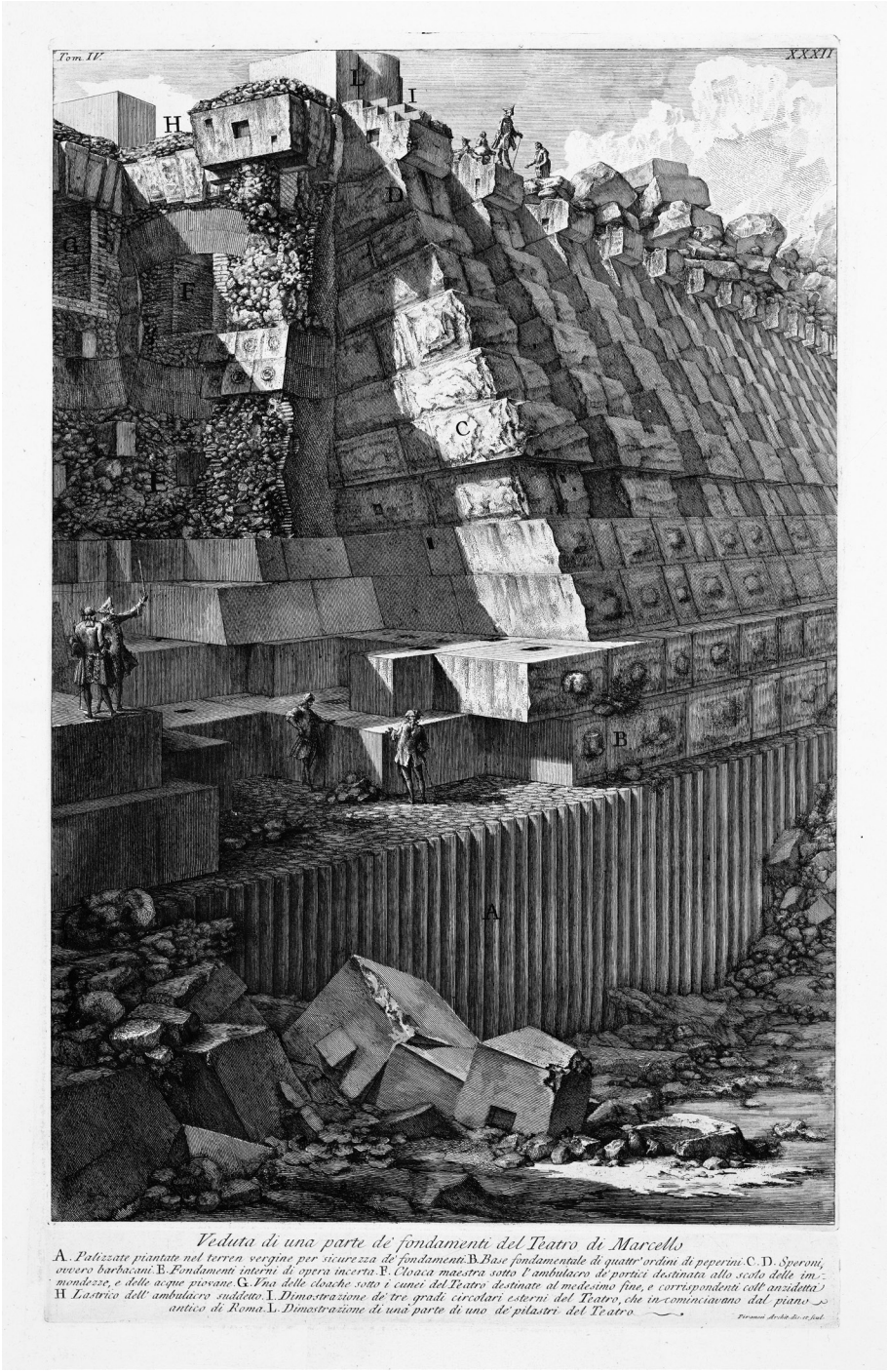
The use of steel as a visible structural element is exemplified in buildings such as the Seagram Building (1958) or the Neue Nationalgalerie (1968), where the steel structure is not only a functional element, but also an aesthetic element. Mies believed that architecture should express its constructive essence, a principle that derives directly from the classical approach to construction.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe represents a bridge between the classical world and modernity[15], managing to combine the order and harmony of the past with the new technological possibilities of the twentieth century. In his architecture, the classical tradition of proportion and clarity is combined with the use of innovative materials such as steel and glass, creating buildings that are both modern and timeless. Ultimately, Mies demonstrated that the dialogue between classical and technology is not an opposition, but a possibility of synthesis, where the eternal values of architecture can be reinterpreted through the new means that technology offers, that is, when it becomes *tekné*. This has allowed his architecture to be not only an expression of modernity, but also to endure as a symbol of order and beauty, just like the classical monuments that inspired him.



Ill. 1. L.B. Alberti, *Caesar's Bridge over the Reno*, vol IV [in:] L.B. Alberti, *L'Architettura*, G. Orlandi (ed.), Il Polifilo, Milano 1966, p. 331.

[15] A. Monestiroli, *La scuola di Mies van der Rohe. I tre livelli della conoscenza*, Ogni uomo è tutti gli uomini Edizioni, Bologna 2013.



Ill. 2. G.B. Piranesi, *Veduta di una parte de' fondamenti del Teatro di Marcello* [in:] G.B. Piranesi, *Le Antichità Romane*, Didot, Parigi 1835 (?), p. XXXII.

Ill. 3. A. Loos, *Loos Haus* (1909–1911), "Bautechniker" 1911, no. 33, suppl.

Ill. 4. L. Mies van der Rohe, *Dominion Center Toronto, Canada* (1963–1969), photo B. Korab 1973, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppem.00695/ (access: 15.10.2024).

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Author's Note

Full Prof. Francesco Saverio Fera, PhD, Arch.

(Genoa 1962). Master Degree in Architecture at the Politecnico di Milano. As a student worked in Ignazio Gardella's office at the architectural competition of the reconstruction of the Opera House Carlo Felice in Genoa (1st prize), project by I. Gardella, A. Rossi and F. Reinhart. From 1987 until 1991, worked in Aldo Rossi's office in Milano being involved in different projects. Adjunct Professor (2002–today) at the Charles E. Daniel Center in Genoa, Clemson University S.C. PhD (2000) at the Architectural School of the University of Genoa. Full professor (2020) in Architectural Composition at the School of Architecture of the University of Bologna – Cesena Campus. Former Coordinator of the Master Degree in Architecture (five years course) of the University of Bologna – Cesena Campus (2016–2021).

saverio.fera@unibo.it