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ABSTRACTION AND EXPERIENCE

ABSTRAKCJA I DOŚWIADCZENIE

Abstract

Experience and abstraction are two complementary concepts, corresponding respectively to the individual position of the user, and thus indicating the purpose of architecture, and to that of the designer, whose task is instead to render individual experience general and collective by abstracting from the theme its general character, thereby carrying out a process of abstraction.
Through Adolf Loos's definition and Ernesto Rogers's thought, this idea is explored and illustrated through a few exemplary works starting from what Loos defines as architecture: the tomb and the monument.

Keywords: *abstraction, experience, memory, subjective/collective*

Streszczenie

Doświadczenie i abstrakcja to dwa uzupełniające się pojęcia, odpowiadające odpowiednio indywidualnej perspektywie użytkownika, a tym samym wskazujące na cel architektury, oraz perspektywie projektanta, którego zadaniem jest nadanie indywidualnemu doświadczeniu charakteru ogólnego i zbiorowego poprzez wyabstrahowanie z tematu jego ogólnego charakteru, a tym samym przeprowadzenie procesu abstrakcji.
Zagadnienie to zostaje rozwinięte w odniesieniu do definicji architektury Adolfa Loosa oraz myśli Ernesta Rogersa, a następnie zilustrowane na przykładzie kilku wybranych dzieł, począwszy od dwóch form, które Loos określa jako architekturę: grobowca i pomnika.

Słowa kluczowe: *abstrakcja, doświadczenie, pamięć, subiektywne/zbiorowe*

The only definition of architecture I know that is written from the point of view of the observer, that is, of the person who experiences it, is Adolf Loos's famous one: "If we find a mound in the woods, six feet long and three feet wide, shaped with a spade into a pyramid, we become serious and something within us says: someone is buried here. *This is architecture.*"[1]

Loos defines *what* architecture is starting from the effect that architecture must produce, thus only presupposing the purpose it sets itself, while postponing the question of *how* this effect can be pursued and generated.

[1] A. Loos, *Ins Lehere gesprochen, collection of writings*, Vienna–Munich 1962; Italian ed., *Parole nel vuoto*, Adelphi, Milano 1972, p. 255.

He then specifies: "Architecture arouses moods in people. The architect's task is therefore to define the mood. The room must appear welcoming, the house habitable."[2] This is another fundamental passage: architecture must arouse moods *appropriate* to the theme to which it is giving form. This statement concerns an indispensable principle of classical architectural theory, the principle of *decorum*: appropriateness, the correspondence of forms to what those forms themselves intend to represent, to the feeling they seek to arouse.

This still leaves the question of *how* one should act in order to achieve this purpose. Yet starting from the definition of *what* architecture is and from the clarification of its properly artistic and expressive *purpose* is a necessary and reliable way of indicating a direction and a working method.

This is exactly what Ernesto Nathan Rogers intends to do by giving one of his famous books the title *Experience of Architecture*. What does he mean by this? Why emphasize experience at a moment when architecture seems to be moving toward functional objectivity and expressive uniformity?

Ernesto Rogers certainly intends to bring attention back to the bond between architecture and life, between art and life. Experience is life, and architecture is an indispensable part of our lives: it constructs the world in which life unfolds, the world we inhabit and "experience." But this theme poses a fundamental difficulty: to place ourselves in the position of users, observers, visitors, or in any case people who experience architecture means adopting a subjective point of view, because experience is personal; sensations and emotions are subjective and individual. Architecture, however, can never be so: architecture is the collective art par excellence, because we all experience it. Whether we wish to or not, architecture and the places it constructs belong to everyone, present themselves to everyone, and construct everyone's world.

Changing our point of observation, placing ourselves instead on the side of design, of *how* one succeeds in "moving" people, in bringing forms to life, in acting upon the individual without relinquishing the idea of collectivity, the problem is to ensure that experience, or at least its fundamental part, is shared.

"Architecture is to move us,"[3] says Le Corbusier: it is necessary to evoke analogous feelings in all those who undergo the same experience, to ensure that the appropriate feeling one wishes to arouse through architectural forms is evident, explicit, unmistakable.

I believe this is the meaning of Loos's definition: anyone who undergoes that same experience, through cultural affinity, memory, and history, feels the same sensations. And through them recognizes a human fact: emotion passes through the senses in order to reach reason. Culture, memory, life itself lead to this recognition and, in Loos's definition, evoke the idea of burial, of death.

Following this path, let us shift our attention to the architect's tasks and to the ways of fulfilling them.

In order to perform this act, from the point of view of design, one must first identify the meaning of the building and the value attributed to it by the culture and society within which it is situated: the *character* proper to every architecture, as Boullée says.[4] This operation aims

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 255.

[3] Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, G. Crès et Cie, Paris 1923; Italian ed. *Verso un'architettur*a, Longanesi, Milano 1973, p. 9.

[4] E-L. Boullée, *Architecture. Essai sur l'Art*, [manuscript], [ca. 1796–1797]. First publication: E-L. Boullée, *Boullée's Treatise on Architecture*, H. Rosenau (ed.), London 1953. Italian ed. *Architettura. Saggio sull'arte*, Marsilio, Padova 1967.

to recognize, within the theme, qualities of generality that belong to individual experience yet are shared by all. If experience is undeniably subjective, in order to make collective the feeling that architecture intends to arouse, it is necessary to identify the general aspect of an architectural theme: the architect must undertake a work of abstraction, abstracting from multifaceted reality an idea that unites different experiences.

Rogers again states: "I want a house that resembles me, that resembles my humanity. Beautifully."[5] This is not only a question of quality, but precisely of generality. The sentence contains *humanity*, a term indicating the generalization of what is individual, belonging to a single person, and *quality*: quality and generality coincide in architecture; quality requires generality, otherwise an architecture remains an episode, a personal expression, perhaps original, but with an originality opposed to the idea of collectivity.

Thus abstraction and experience become complementary, mutually necessary, corresponding to the two modes of architecture: that of those who live it and that of those who design it. The former recognizes meanings and values through empathy, through sensations and emotions; the latter has the task of recognizing a shared value in order to evoke those emotions through forms, to move us, to make us "become serious." The former *lives* the private experience; the latter must seek its generality.

Adolf Loos again proposes a paradox, in evident contradiction with his own work, but useful for clarifying this point of view: only the tomb and the monument are architecture.[6] And perhaps the tomb and the monument, two themes with few functional problems, can clarify the meaning of this argument, which seeks to uphold the inevitability of experience as a properly human fact, and the apparently contradictory necessity for art to operate through abstraction, in order to arrive at a generality that can be understood and recognized by everyone.

The monument contains the theme of memory. In a general sense, we might state that every good work of architecture is a monument when, by activating memory, which is a collective phenomenon, it succeeds in producing feelings appropriate to the theme of the project. But following Loos, we can narrow the field and bring together the themes of burial and monument, or of the memorial or commemorative monument, in order to follow the path that unfolds between abstraction and experience.

The problem of the memorial monument is particularly difficult. Historically, this theme lies between two arts, architecture and sculpture, and has always had a double aspect: figurative in the case of sculpture, and necessarily abstract in the case of architecture. If in the figurative arts recognition and the activation of memory are direct, in abstract art and in architecture in particular this process is more difficult and involves a double passage. Architecture cannot commemorate a deceased person or a collective event through the figure; it cannot activate memory and feelings through direct reference, through figurative representation. Figurative sculpture can represent people and actions, individual or collective, as in the countless monuments to the war dead found in many of our cities. Through architecture, a place, a square, a street, or a garden can be dedicated to the memory of an event or a history.

The great divide is precisely the one that opens between figurative art and abstract art, which sculpture too, at a certain point, had to confront.

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[5] E.N. Rogers, *La casa dell'uomo*, "Domus" 1946, no. 205, p. 3.

[6] *Op. cit.*, *Verso un'architettur*a…, p. 254.

Perhaps Gino Valle's Monument to the Resistance and Deportation in Udine[7] interprets this coexistence: it operates on several levels and defines a place, encloses a space, gives quality to a traffic roundabout by transforming its role and meaning, organizes it on several levels, with the presence of water and greenery, symbolic elements that refer to the places of fighting, and animates it with a sculpture.

What is commemorated and *how* memory is commemorated are two themes that are deeply intertwined, for sculpture as for architecture. In what ways is the memory of something activated?

What can be represented is an *idea* linked to the event, certainly not the event itself, nor its protagonists. And what is carried out is precisely an abstraction: an idea relating to the event or the person is abstracted, and the subject, the theme, is represented. *Evocation* is the action that makes it possible to connect the forms of the work to its meaning, to the theme or subject in question, and to *activate* memory. Memory is an active process: it brings something back to life, the recollection of people, situations, moments, experiences. One participates in a monument; one does not merely look at it. One participates in the emotion it provokes; one does not merely witness it. And memory is necessary, for private emotions as for the collectivity; memory is our history, the continuity of our culture, our identity, and also our future. It must be so if we wish to hand down the values of civilization.

Returning to the point, how does the evocation that activates memory occur? How is an idea represented in a monument?

To evoke is exactly what architecture has always done and continues to do. It has no physical, real object to represent, but must always *abstract* its subjects. Or rather, architecture is perhaps the most concrete of all the arts, in the sense that it possesses an inescapable physicality and is always *built*, yet it is always necessarily *abstract* with respect to the object of representation, to the relationship with the forms of what one wishes to honor; it is always distant, doubly distant, and this constitutes a further difficulty.

Monumental cemeteries and military shrines are particular cases. They are first and foremost cemeteries, such as Redipuglia, to cite one of the most famous examples,[8] burial places that, like all cemeteries, keep alive the memory of people. Collective cemeteries, dedicated to those who died in war, commemorate a collectivity of individuals united by a common fate; they are repetitive, obsessive in bringing people together, telling of their equality in death, if not in life. They remind us of the number, the measure of the tragedy, the enormity of the loss, in a short time and in the same atrocious manner; their vastness through reiteration silences us, leaves us stunned and speechless.

The memorial monument is explicitly evocative; it has a precise, identifiable object to which it refers. We know what is being evoked: the Resistance, a destructive event, a massacre, a single person and his or her deeds, genius, or something else. The process of abstraction concerns both the *what* and the *how*: one must establish which feeling or emotion is to be associated with that event, and then decide how to give architectural form to a monument-place that emotionally evokes it.

In the case of a private, individual tomb, of a monument dedicated to a person, which we might perhaps regard as the smallest nucleus of a memorial monument, this operation is almost impossible. How can the *character* of a person be represented through a construction?

[7] Competition held in 1959, in which architect Gino Valle participated with Federico Marconi and sculptor Dino Basadella.

[8] Architect Giovanni Greppi, sculptor Giannino Castiglioni, 1935.

How can an individual quality be evoked through architecture? Given this impossibility, then, *what* is represented in the monument, what is evoked? Is it only a private emotion, or does a tomb too possess a *collective* value?

I believe this is why, from the point of view of architecture, in some interpretations even the monument to an individual becomes an absolute, a representation of architecture itself, its very metaphor. The monument is architecture, architecture reduced to its essence. It always operates according to a principle of abstraction, which can only also be a principle of generality and essentiality. What, then, is the essence of architecture? How is architecture *in itself* represented?

Following this reasoning, the monument to an individual can only be reduced to what in architecture is irreducible: its *construction*, the properly human act of relating to nature through difference, contrast, opposition. Building distinguishes humankind in its relationship with nature: rather than submitting to it, human beings adapt it to their lives.

For many, it is precisely the representation of the house in its absoluteness, of the *construction* of the house, of a general *idea* of construction, that alone can worthily interpret the tomb-monument. This depends on one's inclinations and on one's interpretation of what is considered essential in the construction of architecture: not merely a practical and technical act, but an absolute act, brought to generality. Not abstract in its means, because it always involves physical construction – heavy, material, spatial – but abstract and general in principle.

Thus for Auguste Perret, an architect searching for the forms of reinforced concrete, the trabeated system – four columns, a base, and an entablature[9] – is the tomb-monument par excellence: the representation of an archetypal mode of construction that refers to the individual, but perhaps recalls, more generally, Man, his presence in the world.

And for Adolf Loos, an architect of walls and volumes, the tomb is a precise cube, with the joints of its stone blocks emphasized,[10] with a door, a window, and a ziggurat roof, an elementary way of covering a space. A black marble cube, severe and somber, which compels us to "become serious" because we recognize that a man is buried there, that this is the house – or rather the metaphor of a house, of an essential construction – the perpetual dwelling of Man beyond life.

We could continue with other examples. Each represents a kind of manifesto of an essential idea of architecture and construction. Perhaps this is also why so many architects have wished to confront this difficult theme.

Perhaps it is instinctive for an architect to pass from the metaphor of architecture – of its absoluteness, of its elementary construction – to that of the city. Distorted, in this case too rendered abstract, without buildings to be functionally inhabited, in order to evoke not one person but many, united in death. Collective monuments, in memory of many: then one house is not enough; many are needed, an entire city is needed. Cemeteries, places or cities of the dead, as Aldo Rossi conceived the cemetery in Modena: a place enclosed by a wall, like an ancient city, with different "houses" inside it. Or as Antonio Monestiroli designs it: a large courtyard open to the fields and landscape, with one collective side, belonging to everyone, with water creating distance to signify respect, and a more concealed, intimate, private side.

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[9] The funerary monument for Madeleine-Dauphin, wife of Paul Jamot, in Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris, 1914–1921.

[10] The tomb for Max Dvořák, designed in 1921. It is in fact a square-plan parallelepiped, approximately five meters on each side and slightly taller, surmounted by the roof; unbuilt, it is documented by a model.

Or, where there is no actual burial but only admonition and memory, an anguishing, uninhabitable city, made to disorient, to make one lose one's way, stripped of humanity. A city that does not welcome but intimidates and creates anxiety, a city from which it is difficult to escape, a labyrinth, an ancient and powerful metaphor that offers no way out: an anti-city, the opposite of the place of encounter and community. The city of fear, an emotion that is always individual even when shared by many, that makes one feel lost and alone; the city of obsessive uniformity that does not allow one to recognize, to recognize oneself, to recognize places. A city governed by a repetitive, oppressive, relentless, unstable rule that makes one's head spin.

These are the emotions we have all felt when entering Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin,[11] [11] intended to evoke the immeasurably worse and truly inescapable emotions of those who actually lived through that tragedy, described to us by the very few who returned.

The metaphor of a city, indeed, out of scale, itself constructed from pure volumes. Houses? Tombs? Everything is directed toward producing anguish. And this is the emotion that this representation seeks to produce, an appropriate emotion of terror and bewilderment, which evokes, which activates the memory of what happened.

As an architect, I believe Eisenman could only have been thinking of a city, a miniature city, not cheerful like those we visited as children, figurative models that represented famous architecture to scale that actually existed, but, once again, an evocative representation, abstract in both content and form, of a city.

And what can we say of Burri's *Cretto*,[12] the work of a sculptor assisted by an architect?

Less abstract, perhaps, because it follows the actual site of the 1968 Belice tragedy, yet it too is the abstraction of a city, the metaphorical representation of a city swept away by the earthquake.

Burri, commissioned to create a work in memory of that event, visits the destroyed city and decides to cover the remains of part of the town of Gibellina with gray concrete, here too, on the hilltop where it had stood, after the town had been rebuilt elsewhere following the earthquake.

Form, dimensions, and blocks are not the same as those that existed before. They are deliberately different: smaller, lower, the spaces more constricted, the streets narrower, between two and three meters. These too can be walked through; here the height of the blocks is constant and almost reaches eye level. One can glimpse outside, see the sky, and contemplate with nostalgia, sensing the contrast, the gentle landscape of the slopes, like the terrain on which the old town once stood and where the *Cretto* now lies: a city that can be traversed but not inhabited, or a representation of the ground split by the earthquake, depending on whether it is seen from within or from above. The result is the same: desolation, bewilderment, absence of life, parched earth that no longer sprouts and can no longer receive anyone; nostalgia for a past that cannot return but is definitively buried beneath those concrete masses with varying perimeters, as in ancient cities, but with a sharp, precise, uniform height, as never occurs in a real city.

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[11] The Holocaust Memorial was built following two competitions, in 1994 and 1997; construction began in 2003 and it was inaugurated in 2005.

[12] The work was commissioned by the mayor of Gibellina, Hon. Ludovico Corrao, begun in 1985 with the collaboration of architect Zanmatti, interrupted in 1989, and completed in 2015, on the centenary of Burri's birth.

Here too, to me as an architect, the metaphor of a city seems evident, perhaps more readily suggested here by the event itself, by what was there and is no longer. And the emotions provoked by arriving there, seeing it, walking through it – its very unreality as a real city, the sensation that it once was one, the grief for its disappearance, for the irreparable loss of people, places, life and culture, and history – *evoke*, as in other monuments, activate a memory, a participation that for me is not direct, because I did not live through it, but which is exactly the task that, I believe, a memorial monument must perform: it is the experience that anyone, as a visitor, undergoes.



Ill. 1. Gibellina's Cretto, A. Burri (photograph by R. Neri)



Ill. 2. Holocaust Memorial, Berlin, P. Eisenman (photograph by R. Neri)

References

[1] Boullée E.-L., *Architecture. Essai sur l'Art* [manuscript], [ca. 1796/1797].

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[3] Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, G. Crès, Paris 1923; Italian ed. *Verso un'architettura*, Longanesi, Milano 1973.

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[5] Rogers E.N., *La casa dell'uomo*, "Domus" 1946, no. 205, pp. 2–3.

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