

Essays by Claudio Silvestrin

(Extracted and compiled from his office website on August 2013)

IO NO!

by Claudio Silvestrin

Disaster

I have been educated to believe that being an architect is a vocation, just as it is a vocation to be a priest. I have been educated to believe that architecture is the most complete form of art, bridging man and nature, earth and sky, god and mortals. I have believed, and still do, that architecture is composing poetry on earth in partnership with the earth; that architecture has the role of transmitting the emotion of matter, space, light and water. .

I think the most popular contemporary construction nowadays is the exaltation of perverse and simplistic forms, reflecting a union that is neurotic and narcissistic, ignoring five thousand years or more of history. Modern man feels that he is the centre of the universe; his arrogance and vanity demand constructions that are in fact mirrors. The powerful man and the neurotic man subconsciously recognize themselves in the high-tech style, in sensationalist and deconstructive architecture.

One must be blind or asleep not to notice: we are a materialistic civilisation of institutionalised, perverse forms. It is a real disaster: the forms of contemporary construction have separated from the stars. The clearest paradox, represented by religious buildings, is the most saddening. These edifices are sensationalistic, self-gratifications in reinforced concrete; they have ceased to be spaces for God and have become places for man.

It is not a matter of right or wrong but of acknowledging and being aware of this, in order to make decisions that embody firm principles. The contemporary architect is fortunate that he or she has the freedom of choice, a responsible choice.

One should ask: is architecture the expression of a deepening thought or is it a non-critical conformity? Questioning does not mean going against evolution and progress; on the contrary, serious questioning can bring a contribution to awaken the sensitivity of man towards an evolution that is not only technological and materialistic but a total evolution that is simultaneously material and spiritual, modern and archaic, anthropological and ecological.

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Religious Attitude

Living the profession of contemporary architect in a religious manner requires a psychological trauma that is almost permanent. To clarify, I'm not speaking of recognised and institutionalized religion, but of a religious attitude, serious, profound, rigorous, healthy and full. A rock against rampant corruption, with unshaken faith in one's mission and in the gift of talent one wants to offer in order to ensure the survival of sensibility in the world. Proposing the poetry of space with novelty and individuality leads to uncertainty and incomprehension, and the interlocutor is caught off guard. If for materials you propose water rather than plastic, stone rather than glass, a void rather than unconditional exploitation of space, elegance rather than sensationalism, the symbol rather than the captivating effect, the magic of light rather than light as a lux quantity, a primitive sense rather than a contemporary one.

They respond:

- architect, enough with poetry, nobody wants it anymore, people don't understand it anyway!
- architect, you're so old fashioned!
- architect, very nice! But the space needs to be exploited, at the price I paid for it!
- architect, you're too sophisticated!
- architect, but there isn't enough light!
- architect, what are archetypes?

Paradoxically the more you encounter ignorance, lack of sensibility, arrogance, mediocrity and corruption, the stronger the desire not to succumb to this poisoning of the spirit. It's true, if you play the game, you can build big, have multimedia success, fame, money and power. And there is freedom to choose, which, fortunately, every architect or designer has today. Sure, the powerful make you pay for it – they don't allow you to win a competition because you didn't dine with a member of the jury, they don't give you a building permit because you don't propose what is in vogue at the moment, they don't choose you because you're not part of their club.

I remember once at a presentation for a residential project competition in Switzerland, the presiding professor of the jury said that my project had a Palladium flavour. I blushed from the embarrassment, from the surprise and from the compliment. Thanks! I responded innocently. I was eliminated, because for that Swiss scholar, Palladium meant Italian and, therefore, not modern.

At a presentation at the LandMark of New York, they told me that rather than presenting a project with an individual and unique configuration, as the one I proposed, I had to take inspiration from recently constructed buildings designed by the usual big

names. At a competition in which I participated in Italy, the first seven prizes were given to seven university professors of the same city, not one architect of national fame of international fame – absolutely outrageous. To defend their territory, the bosses of the various clans (including those of architects) put obstacles in your way and when you manage to build something, they prevent communication of your achievements or render them insignificant in the context of contemporary culture. My fortune is, on one hand, my faith in the meaning of my work and, on the other, my spontaneity in forgetting about the disappointments, betrayals and eliminations and looking forward, pushing ahead like an elephant, with the enthusiasm of doing and creating, albeit with the knowledge that human ingratitude knows no limits.

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The Supreme Ambition

Great architects and great architecture are my source of inspiration when it comes to my ethics and designs. But that is not all: essays, philosophy, poetry, even reading the newspaper can stimulate my creative thought process and my design choices.

On 20th December 2004 I read an excellent article by Francesco Alberoni in Corriere della Sera, entitled 'A world that moves very fast but knows not how to dream'. The writer accurately observes the results that cultural relativism, its frenzy and superficiality, have had on modern society. We might ask ourselves what this has to do with the occupation of architect. Well nothing, if we believe in tidy categorisation and we view the profession as specialist and compartmentalised. I believe however that being an architect does not mean being removed from cultural relativism, the Kafkaesque machine. Indeed I believe it expresses the concept just as well as a fashion magazine or a CD that is used up and quickly forgotten.

The majority of critics within the sector believe that the architect should express the culture of his time. The dogmatic architect views this media truth as absolute. Luckily for me this 'fact' is not written in any sacred texts or in Plato, and so doubting its authenticity is legitimate. Indeed I would go even further and suggest that the very task of the architect is not to express the values of cultural relativism or even his own contemporary culture.

In 1927, the German Pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe in Barcelona was a masterpiece that broke completely from the conventions of the time. A masterpiece

that is still visible today, its innovative spirit certainly didn't reflect the predominant culture of its day.

Alberoni talks about decadence in his article but at the same time also of hope, dreams and spirituality. The spirituality of the layman is pointless, a waste, redundant. Alberoni's conclusion should perhaps be food for thought for the designer who says 'not me!' or for the planner who refuses to construct 'self-expressing' perverse forms of today's sensationalism.

The article concludes thus: '[Because there is] a place where every now and then we can take shelter, purify ourselves, find some peace and come out again stronger. Without this we would slide into an intolerable abyss.' The more superficial reader may think of an exotic holiday destination, but when Alberoni talks of purification he is not talking of our bodies in terms of tired flesh and bones, or a nervous system fraught with stress, but rather the purification of the mind.

Is this the supreme ambition of architecture? And why supreme? Because a purified mind puts the driving force of our inner animal desire to sleep and awakens our consciousness of the Divine that exists in Nature. The man-animal makes room for the man-spiritual.

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