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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LECTURE

EDITED BY FABIO MARINO AND ELENA FIORETTO (POLITECNICO DI MILANO)

REVIEWS BY THE EDITORIAL STAFF

ARCHITECTURE AND REPRESENTATION *ETCHING, ENGRAVING, PAINTING*

Edited by Fabio Marino and Elena Fioretto (Politecnico di Milano)

TITLE
Architecture and Representation
Etching, Engraving, Painting

GUEST SPEAKER
Anthony Vidler

DATE
Monday, June 29th, 2020

EVENT
MANTOVARCHITETTURA 2020

LOCATION
Online

This was the last lecture that Anthony Vidler[1] delivered at the Polytechnic of Milan during Mantovarchitettura Festival in 2020. Summer had just begun, after months quite complicated and unusual times, trying to cope with the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic emergency. Despite everything, Mantovarchitettura proceeded nonetheless, entirely online, thanks to the contributions of architects and scholars who had participated in previous editions over the years. Such as Vidler who remotely, from his home and ill for a while, showcased emblematic works of architect-artists who, in representing architecture, had managed to construct design theories, revealing overlaps and mutual influences that blur the boundaries of the two disciplines. A journey that has started from the dawn of the Enlightenment, reviewing French architects of the 18th century, and then Schinkel and Soane, extended to the contemporary era, using the architect-painter Aldo Rossi to guide the conclusions of his discourse. This lecture on the relationship between architecture and representation allows for some reflections on the process that unfolds between the development of an idea and its materialization. Vidler's arguments – fragments of memories and anecdotes about the great

revolutionary French architects – ideally connected to an Enlightenment dimension, stimulate reflections on the concept of transformation – change of states, in their scientific sense related to the world of physics – and transition. This encourages thoughts about how to approach contexts that have experienced destruction in its various manifestations. Vidler concluded his lecture by demonstrating the difference between those who have the ability to enter the spirit of the past and bring it into the present time, and those who simply copy the past in a banal or highly abstract manner. These issues are not different from those faced by anyone who deals with the not-so-simple problem of relating to what is already destroyed, or at risk of irreversibly dissolving and being lost forever.

Drawing, painting, working in three dimensions in the arts is an essential characteristic of architectural design. All the most successful architects I know have been painters, have been sculptors, have been interested in a whole range of techniques of representation, including all the contemporary architects who are now experimenting more and more with representation in computerization. So, the first moment where architecture and representation coincided together in a very fundamental way was, of course, the emergence of ways of representing perspective in the Renaissance. And this had an immediate impact. Immediately façades in the Renaissance are in fact designed in order to be seen in prospettiva, in perspective. And so, we have the ideal cities of the Renaissance, all constructed according to perspective.

The relationship between architecture and painting has always been very strong. The way of representing architecture has varied over the centuries, not only as a result of a perfection in technique, but by indulging the creative genius of artists and their aspirations to communicate new meanings. Some ways of representing architecture, contribute to prefigure certain architectures, suggesting atmospheres, or states of mind, revealing precise intentions of the architect.

The relationships between architecture and painting is very strong. We have a whole series of paintings by Poussin, who in fact copied most of his architectural inventions from Palladio's unbuilt works. We have a very strong relationship also with Canaletto, who is developing a Fantasia di Venezia, a fantasy of Venice producing in venetian context the fantasy of the building of Palladio's unbuilt project: a dreamlike vision of Venice as it would have been had if Palladio built it. And this is a fantasy vision that appealed enormously to a number of architects through the 19th and 20th century. It became one of the primary images of the, what he called the Architettura Analoga, the Analogues architecture, of Aldo Rossi. And of course, the extraordinary fantasies of the Carceri, the prisons, that Piranesi developed between the 1750s and the 1770s. There are two versions of the invented prisons, the carceri d'invenzione, by Giovanni Battista Piranesi and the way in which these particular techniques of engraving and etching led to the possibility of a sense of atmosphere. I want to talk about atmosphere that was

suggested in the carceri of Piranesi, which became extraordinary popular, and were printed and distributed throughout Europe, and are especially popular in France. These are of course impossible environments. There is a wonderful essay by Manfredo Tafuri, early in his work La sfera e il labirinto, where he talks about the relationship between these two states of the carceri, the first and the second, and the impossibility of the perspectives within these states. You can actually trace through each of these traits, states the whole series of different perspective views, a whole different set of viewpoints, so there is never one single viewpoint. All viewpoints are fractured and broken as these prisons fall apart in the vision Piranesi.

The argument moves from the visionary architects of the French Enlightenment, that Vidler knows well. Architects who are also painters, or aspire to be.

I will be talking about three or four architects each of who have a different relationship to painting, and have different relationship to representation. We are talking about Étienne-Louis Boullée, who has a very powerful relationship to the notion of painting. I will be talking about Claude Nicolas Ledoux, who has an equally powerful relationship to the notion of engraving. And we will see that Boullée, who always wants to be a painter, and Ledoux, who was trained to be an engraver, have developed very different architectures out of their forms of representation. So, I want to suggest that the form of representation is selected by an architect. It reveals what is a very powerful determinant of the architecture of that particular architect.

So Boullée, who was one of the earliest professionals in Paris, trained in the school of Blondel in the middle of the 18th century. He did not want to be an architect. He always wanted to be a painter. In fact, he tried. His father was an architect, and his father did not want him to be a painter. He thought that if Boullée had become a painter he would have not make any money, and he wanted his son to go into a proper trade like architecture, where he would have made some money and he would have been a proper professional. Boullée always tried to be a painter. He actually worked in the studios of many of the painters from Hubert Robert atelier, and others painters of the 1740s and 1750s, before he was forced by his father to enter architectural school. He left behind, at his death, just after the French Revolution in the 1790s, an essay which he never published, that circulated among his friends but he never published it. It was published for the first time in the 20th century and translated by none other than the architect Aldo Rossi, who found in it a particular way of thinking about architecture that stimulated his ability to criticize the functionalism of modern architecture in the 1920s and 1930s.

So, we have Aldo Rossi in the 1970s translating Boullée, and if you look at the front page of Boullée book, Architecture, Essay on the art, underneath he places an epigraph: Ed io anche son pittore. An epigraph that was taken from the famous Baroque painter Antonio da

Correggio: and I also am a painter. So Boullée never wanted to be mistaken just for an architect. He hardly built anything, but presented his work in painting after painting after painting. This is what Rossi says about Boullée. Boullée is not simply an 18th century enlightenment, a rationalist, he is an exalted rationalist. Esaltato! For Rossi means that Boullée tried to bring the theme of architecture to an experienced level where the emotions that the architecture provoked, given the subject of the architecture, were very perceptible in the architecture itself. In Architettura, Saggio sull'arte you can see exactly what Boullée preferred: "painters are so much more free, are so much more liberal and open then architects; architects are always obliged to fall under the powers of the client, whereas painters can develop in their paintings l'immagine sublime". And it is that word sublime, sublime that I want to follow through Boullée, because it becomes the key word for his architecture. He tried to emulate the painters that began to develop a kind of imaginative sublime. And that word in that moment, in the 1750s and 1760s, was an incredibly powerful word. It was a powerful word in the sense that painters were beginning to experience and to experiment with the effects of emotion. For several years Boullée worked in his atelier showing two things: one the effect and emotions of age, and then the effects and emotions created by light, by chiaroscuro. The development of this notion of sublime by Boullée then becomes a question of how to illustrate the powers of science, which had been developed in the Enlightenment by scientists and especially scientist like Newton.

The English philosopher Edmund Burke in his book published in 1757, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, demonstrated that all art did not have to be beautiful, that all art could also be in his terms sublime and be promoting of the most extraordinary powerful emotions: the question of the terrible, the question of terrible terror, the question of obscurity, the question of size of dimension, the question of privation, the question of seeming infinity. All these senses, that one had in nature in nor nature from volcanoes to forests, to the immensities of the sea, could be seen as aesthetic sensations, which Burke called the sublime, where the uniformity and succession of elements, the hugeness of elements, light the brilliance of the sun's light, the darkness, the shift between white and obscurity, light and darkness, would all render the works of poetry, the works of literature, works of painting, and for Boullée the works of sublime architecture. The sublime image of knowledge that Boullée developed out of a painting into architecture, and out of an architecture into a sense of sublimity of knowledge, and the depth and the extraordinary visions of knowledge that the Enlightenment had brought all the way back to antiquity.

If Boullée, the exalted rationalist, sought in his designs to emulate the painters who represent the sublime, Ledoux not only represented it but also constructed it, in a precise and geometric way, anticipating the rational abstractions of modernity.

So, I want to turn to a more cheerful architect. An architect who built a lot more than Boullée. A contemporary of Boullée slightly younger, about eight years younger: Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. He left series of buildings, a lot of buildings still exist. He was trained as an engraver and as a student he used his talents as an engraver to earn money while he was going to architecture school. He used all the talents of shading, of drawings, of engraving in this enlarged version of his book *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation*. A book that has got several hundred pages and an extraordinary text, almost a utopian text, but at the same time is full of paintings and engravings that in end are the inspiration for his books. He designed an antique frontispiece for his book, penetrating the kind of mystery of going behind the title *Architecture, considered in relation to Art, Morals and Legislation*. The first architectural monograph to be developed by an architect that in its tittle deals with the relationship between architecture and society. And accordingly, he developed engraving after engraving, hundreds of engravings, many of them not done by him, but done by engravers under his supervision. In his work *A play on the bridge of boats*, that bridge of boats which was such a common device in army is idealize by Ledoux. These of boats are no longer war boats, but they are swans. He looked at all the engravings in the encyclopaedia of the various structures and forms of everyday life. So, if you compare this engraving with the engraving of the military bridge of boats in the encyclopaedia, you will see that he is moving from reality into ideal through his own techniques of engraving. Ledoux used the engraving in order to develop the whole series of ideal monuments based on geometry.

And here you see the different between Ledoux and Boullée. Ledoux also has a sense of the sublime, but his sublime is based on abstraction, is based in pure geometry, is based in the pure cubic geometry of the Enlightenment, is based in rationalism and we saw Rossi talking about Boullée's exalted rationalism. Rossi will also speak about conventional and geometrical rationalism of Ledoux. So Ledoux is in the end much more of an architect, much more of an engraver, much less of painter then Boullée. Ledoux took the form of everyday life and turned it into geometry and made a geometrical element for the building up of his ideal city. He took an engraving from encyclopaedia and turned it into the architecture idealization for his ideal city. So, the play between painting and architecture of Boullée develops a kind of atmospheric architecture and the engraving and architecture of Ledoux develops an architecture of precision and geometry. An architecture that was thought by many in the 1920s, the era of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, and Adolf Loos had anticipated in its abstract geometry, the abstract geometries of modernity.

Figure 1. Caspar David Friedric, Der Mönch am Meer (1808-1810)

Shifting to Germany and the circle of Karl Friedrich Schinkel and to another painter, Caspar David Friedrich, who is the painter of the sublime. Burke had been translated in German and everyone was understanding the possibilities of developing painting that could appeal to the deepest and most terrifying emotions. The emotions of the ruined abbey and the emotions of the ruined trees, so nature and art ruined within the eternal flux of nature and given a representation of terror, of the terror of time, the terror of history, the terror of decay. And in the *Mönch am Meer*, *The Monk by the sea*, a sense of the infinity of the sea, the infinity of the sky, the solitary nature of the individual, the alumnus of the individual, the terror of infinity as Burke would say, is imaged in Caspar David Friedrich's painting. At beginning of the 19th century in the moment of historical transformation, where revolution in France and Germany have brought about new states, have brought about the fall of monarchies, where history stretched behind and the future stretch in front in an unknown void, the monk on the sea was alone not just in nature but also in time: the sublimity of temporal depth. Schinkel who was a colleague and friend of Caspar David Friedrich in Berlin also had aspiration to be a painter. Schinkel represented the allegory of the notion of an architecture that emerges out of nature, and the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages actually that emerges as a not just an imitation but almost organically coming out of the ruins of nature itself. So, we get the sense of architecture that organically emerges out of life through the painting of temporality, through the painting of panoramas and his own sense of history of architecture that emerges in the same way from simple block of stone all the way through the arches.

In conclusion, Vidler states how through painting, it is possible to achieve the research of the sublime, which has united so many architects and artists, who have often worked together to achieve this goal. The architect whose work aspires to such a quest finds in painting the perfect medium to experience the sublime, which is not necessarily realisable. This is

reminded of certain architectural paintings by Aldo Rossi, or Gandy's ruins, which construct new meanings and exorcise the uncertainty of the future, which does not exclude destructive scenarios.

 And in England John Soane, who was not a painter, became very close friends and supporters of a painter. Joseph Michael Gandy was someone who all his life worked for Soane, illustrating Soane's buildings in the way that Soane, the architect, wanted them illustrated. Between 1788 to 1853 Soane draw up the labyrinth of the different halls, the different rooms of the Bank of England, each one of which is constructed according to Soane's imitation of Rome. There is an extraordinary painting that Gandy proposed to demonstrate - this is something that if you are going to be in any way architects you should begin to take this to heart - to the Bank of England management that if they had built the building that Soane had just designed, if they had built this in two thousands of years it would look as good as the ruins of Rome.

Figure 2. Aerial cutaway view of Soane's Bank of England by J.M. Gandy (1830)

It demonstrates to the client that even if his building fell into ruins, it would look great and it would look just like Rome. So, this is how an architect and a painter can work together to deal with time, to deal with the future, to deal with the terror of the future. You can actually anticipate the future by ruining the design you just made in order to demonstrate that it will make a good ruin.

And finally Aldo Rossi and the way in which in his work *L'Architettura della città* of 1966 took the 18th century, Boullée and Ledoux and an 18th century architect Milizia, as the basis for his own form of architectural typology. Of course the cemetery of San Cataldo, where the painting of the cemetery becomes as powerful, and certainly this painting was with many other of the same kind finished many many years before the actual cemetery was built and became an image that circulated through the world. An image of the way in which Aldo Rossi would take from the 18th century and transformed the 18th century into a form of Neo-razionalismo of not rationalism but Neo-rationalism demonstrated in

his exhibition at the Milanese Triennale of 1973, where he developed the whole theory of Neo-rationalism out of the 18th century, out of his translation one year earlier of Boullée and exalted version of modernism. In other words, for him the rationalism of the 18th century transformed by Boullée into an exalted rationalism, will become for him a way of transforming modernism, the geometrical modernism of Le Corbusier and others in the 1920s into an exalted form of modernism, bringing together the two in painting. So, it is through painting, I recall, actually Rossi brings his architecture to a perfect state, in a way that the actual buildings themselves may not always give you that sense of a sublime experience.

NOTES

[1] Anthony Vidler (1941-2023) was an English architectural historian, noted expert on the life and work of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Graduated at the University of Cambridge, he received his Ph.D. from Technical Univesity of Delft, and then began his career at Princeton University in 1965, before moving to the Univesity of California in 1993. Afterward, he was the dean of the Cooper Union's architecture school from 2001 to 2013 taking over John Hejduk's legacy.