





**SAN ROCCO**  
FUCK CONCEPTS! CONTEXT!  
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## EDITORIAL

Contemporary architecture is generally presented with the phrase “My concept is . . .”, in which the blank is filled in by some sort of notion: “My concept is freedom”, “My concept is the iPad”, “My concept is the Big Bang”, “My concept is democracy”, “My concept is panda bears”, “My concept is M&M’s”. This statement is then followed by a PowerPoint presentation that begins with M&M’s and ends with round, pink bungalows on paradisiacal Malaysian beaches.

According to concepts, to design is to find what buildings *are*: an ontology for dummies that turns banality into spectacle. Thus, the library *is* the books, the stadium *is* the muscles, the promenade *is* the beach, the aquarium *is* the fish, the swimming pool *is* the water and grandmother’s garage *is* grandmother.

Concepts are a tool used to justify design decisions *in the absence of architecture*. Concepts originate from a state of self-inflicted despair in which design needs to be justified point by point, and architecture by definition has no cultural relevance. Concepts presuppose that nothing specifically architectural exists in reality: there are no spatial relationships, no territories and no cities, and it is thus impossible to obtain any knowledge about these phenomena. Concepts are the tools used to make architecture in a world of post-atomic barbarians. Conan and Mad Max would dream up a concept for imagining how to erect their own primitive huts.

Concepts claim to *translate architecture into an everyday language*. As such, concepts claim to be *democratic*, and therefore claim that

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Paris, march 2012: Fuck context. Basement of Villa dall’Ava by OMA with model of the Zeebrugge Sea Terminal by OMA.  
Photograph by Freek Persyn

they allow people with no architectural education to understand buildings. The point here is that *translating architecture into an everyday language* is nonsensical (and, contrary to popular opinion, there is nothing democratic about nonsense). Architecture is immersed in and appropriated by language, but it is not itself a language: architecture is about modifying landscapes and shaping spatial conditions, not about communicating information or celebrating values (values can occupy architecture, but architecture cannot produce them: like a bowl, architecture can be filled, but it cannot generate its own content). So, no *translation* of architecture is possible, just as it is impossible to “translate” dance or ice hockey. Here the problem is not only the reduction of complexity that is associated with any kind of populism, but also the translation into a mediocre story of something that is simply not a story. In other words, the problem is not that of *mediocre translation*; the problem is *translation in general*. In the end, there is nothing to *understand* in buildings. And democracy is certainly not about *understanding* architecture: it is about *accessing* architecture. You just need to enter, move, look, wait, climb, stop . . . That’s it.

Concepts exist because of the unnecessary feeling that architecture *needs an explanation*, that architecture *needs to apologize*. Concepts describe what architecture will do before architecture is made, thereby guaranteeing that it will not do anything else. Concepts turn architecture into something safe, predictable, tamed. With concepts, there are no nightmares in the city, no nasty jokes, no surprises, no contradictions, no complexity, no congestion, no memory, no subconscious. Concepts prevent any free appropriation; they erase any surprise. The only gestures admitted into buildings are the *conceptual* ones that were used to *explain* them. Like ghosts, concepts do not want to vacate the buildings they generated; concepts do not accept their own disappearance in the final product.

Concepts introduce a kind of rationality that makes projects automatic-pilot-justified in every step of the construction process. Concepts help decision-makers to remember and re-tell the reasons for their decisions to those who charged them with their task, whether these people are parliamentary commissions, committees of kindergarten mothers or voters. In this way, concepts start an endless chain of justifications that are certainly more bureaucratic than democrat-

ic (concepts and bureaucracy have always been allies, at least since Colbert and Perrault screwed poor old Bernini). The need to explain, justify and certify the project *now* – and to do all of this *easily* – prevents any possible future complexity in the building. Concepts operate as a form of violence of the present against the future. The period of construction becomes more important than the building’s lifespan. The immediate dialogue with clients and contractors becomes more important than the future richness of the building. The design is totally dependent on the narration that is required to sell the building. (Note: this, to a certain extent, is unavoidable; what *is* avoidable is building the cultural legitimacy of architecture precisely upon its very dependence on these oversimplified narrations, or turning selling into an ideology.)

Concepts protect us from running the risk of engaging with form. Why should we bother with form when we have an *idea*? Why waste time seeking beauty when we can claim that we are *solving problems*? Why think when we can happily sit around a table and do some *brainstorming*? Why take the pains to learn something when we can shout “Eureka!” in your face?

Anyhow, it is possible to escape from this *selbstverschuldete Minderheit*. Complexity exists, *in re*, in *context*. Cities and territories are here, and it is possible to understand them!

Nothing else is needed. Just pay attention; just trust silence and immobility. In the end, to design is to define contexts, to re-shape what is already there, to formalize the given. No concepts are needed, and neither are messages or literature. The relationship between humans and buildings is *spatial*, being simply based on the fact that both humans and buildings occupy portions of space but with this difference: contrary to humans, buildings survive for long periods of time and do not move. There seems to be a possibility for interaction between humans and architecture, one that is quite interesting and unpredictable: a possibility for built matter to operate on human behaviour by means of its own immobility. And this clumsy brotherhood of architecture and human gestures, this mute complexity, survives only if the relationship is both immediate *and* indirect, evident *and* untold. Nobody has probably ever exposed the nature of this relationship as precisely or bravely as Rossi did: “Go to an old folks’ home: sorrow is

something tangible. Sorrow is in the walls, in the courtyards, in the dormitory” (Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 1966).

“Go to an old folks’ home” and “sorrow is something tangible” – there is no link between the two phrases, no explanation: sorrow and the old folks’ home are just there together. The relationship is *spatial* in character in the sentence itself too: here is the building, there is sorrow. “Sorrow is in the walls”. No jokes. No concepts. Sorrow manifests itself *in space* – *in* the walls, *in* the courtyards, *in* the dormitory. This crystallized sorrow that materializes as walls cannot be described, just pointed out. Sorrow is not the *concept* behind the building, nor does the building *represent* sorrow; rather, sorrow is a specific condition produced in space by the series of acts accumulated through time in a specific place. Unhappiness does not need concepts, and neither does happiness.

**So, fuck concepts! Context! And fuck content! Form!**

## **ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT IDEAS?! IN DEFENCE OF CONCEPTS**

**Jan Bovelet**

To be frank, the elimination of concepts from the realm of architecture seems to be neither a smart nor a promising move, particularly if concepts are identified with ideas. However, even though Vitruvius had already seen the concurrent development of language and architecture as early as the 1st century BC, today it seems necessary to review the role of concepts in architecture and architectural design. It must also be said that it is not the role of language and linguistic concepts in general that we must critically review, but that of one particular kind of language, namely formal languages. The development of architecture and urban phenomena in the 19th and 20th centuries was profoundly influenced by that of modern logic and then by the subsequent emergence of the digital habitat. In the course of this, it has gotten subsumed all too often under the rules of formal linguistic systems that are, among other things, prone to capitalistic bureaucracy/rationalization. But this diagnosis, of course, does not imply that ideas cannot or should not play any role in architecture; as epistemic concepts they are an indispensable component in the creation and use of architecture. In fact, these epistemic concepts, these ideas, are precisely what enable us to make, perceive, debate and use architecture. Our task here is to differentiate the epistemic role of concepts in architecture from the “linguistification” of architecture by way of externally imposed formal concepts.

In order to get a clearer grasp of the difference between epistemic and formal concepts, three philosophical considerations are of particular relevance: the difference between natural and artificial languages, the epistemic difference between the context of justification and the context of discovery in the theory of science, and the notion that