

EDITORIAL

Bramante is the most important architect in the history of Western architecture.

This fact alone would be a sufficient reason for this issue, but the additional fact that Bramante died 500 years ago merits its own celebration. Most of all, now that globalization has come full circle and we live in an entirely unified market, we must address Bramante's work as the foundation of universalism in Western architecture.

Bramante imagined a single, universal architectural language that could deal with any potential architectural problem. Of course, universalism implies a sort of suspicious generosity, and Bramante's project is certainly a colonialist project. Still, universalism – at least in the form of the market – won, and now it can only be criticized from within by recognizing the violence it brings with it, as well as by rediscovering the generosity that is equally implicit in a universal project.

Bramante was probably the most ruthless intellectual of the Renaissance, for he promoted his cultural project with the haste and cold-blooded brutality of a military campaign, seizing control over classical antiquity in the same manner in which a conquistador lays claim to a luxuriant paradise. And yet Bramante – *der Zorn Gottes* – is also, together with Machiavelli, the most conscious intellectual of his time with respect to the double-sided nature of the Renaissance. Bramante never underestimated the darker side of his cultural project. Bramante conquered an empire on behalf of Western architecture that was as splendid as it was fragile and then bequeathed it, with all of its implicit burden of oppression, rage and fear, but also with its unlikely humanity and problematic innocence, to all Western and Westernized architects (including us). The violent generosity of Bramante's work

remains the foundation of any contemporary attempt to imagine a universal architectural language for a globalized world.

Bramante is both a complicated architect and a simple one. He is complicated because his work does not correspond to a precise style and revels in a broad range of figures and masks. Thus, when Bramante leaves Milan for Rome, his architecture changes in such an extreme manner that, without documentary proof, we would never have been able to assign the works he designed in the two cities to the same hand. Bramante is also complicated because his work is never directly creative; rather, it has a more editorial tone, for it always combines the creative efforts of others. Indeed, he always works with pre-existing pieces, and the quality of his work lies not in its content but rather in the process set in motion by his intelligence. Bramante is the ultimate abstract architect, and for precisely this reason, the ultimate pragmatic architect. He works with what is available and with the utmost speed. He is fully aware of the brief duration of the opportunities that come his way. As a result, Bramante's projects comprise a set of extremely simple gestures, ones that are simply combined, sometimes in an unexpected manner. This results in an endlessly mutable but undestroyable architecture. Bramante is no purist, and he accepts – in fact, he actually likes – contamination. His architecture is impure from the beginning, for it is programmatically open to all sorts of opportunities, but at the same time it is incredibly clean, for no circumstance is capable of compromising the clear distinction of architectural words (which he basically leaves to circumstance) and architectural language (which is always perfectly controlled). Bramante seems to perceive this duality in Roman ruins: he sees the different temporality of the different figures and reads through them the different desires incorporated into the buildings. So, for Bramante there is no reason for any intolerance, provided the distinction between the different terms of the architectural problem is maintained. For this reason, Bramante does not need to entirely control the buildings he designs. Only San Satiro, the Cortile della Pace and the Tempietto can be considered the result of a design completely by Bramante. As for the rest of his oeuvre, Bramante rarely designs more than 10% of what is attributed to him. None of Bramante's buildings is really Bramante's; his presence in their design is by definition elusive. His temporary residence makes any project he is associated with fundamentally unresolved. Bramante is somehow always in the air. He is always where the power is – or, perhaps, where he can somehow manage to partici-

pate in the intrigue of building. His architecture, if it does exist, is formulated in riddles that others have to resolve. In fact, Bramante's architecture is rather like points of condensation in a landscape of possibilities. In a context where centres of power are endlessly shifting, Bramante operates as a skilled deployer of formal points of reference, apoliticized, without content. There is no content, for there never is a proper building, only corners, or suggestions – a whole virtual world of hypotheses. Somehow Bramante hovers about any relevant building of the time. This diffused presence is for the most part based on hearsay and indirect proof. Bramante's oeuvre is either gargantuan or almost non-existent. The intelligence of his quasi-invisible signature, of his authorial lack of authoriality, fits perfectly with his foundation of universalism.

Bramante goes to his construction sites only a couple of times and attempts to exert control over them by addressing just parts of the larger whole: a foundation, a layout, a corner . . . The case of St Peter's is amazing: Bramante left us a puzzle made of a few drawings, a model of the dome, four piers, a detail of a capital (which, by the way, he just copied from the Pantheon) and a choir that was in the wrong location and was thus to be demolished. The promise of the building, as an urban artefact, creates a narrative and establishes a point of reference. To a certain extent, Bramante designs his buildings as ruins: structure punctuated by voids. In a universe where buildings are only started and never finished, the key to the game is not brilliance in a project's elaboration, but the blunt and uncompromising decision to begin the project in the first place.

Bramante carries out his conquest of the universal architectural language with incredible speed. Once in Rome, he needs to define a formal language capable of responding to all of the challenges posed by contemporary cities and of being shared and used by all the subjects collaborating in the production of the city. Bramante masters this new (old) language in just a few years, from his execution of the Chiostro della Pace (ca. 1500–4) to the Tempietto of San Pietro in Montorio (probably around 1502). In contrast to the clumsy, hyper-respectful, antiquarian efforts of his contemporary Giuliano da Sangallo, for Bramante, the refined architectural language of the past (*la bella maniera degli antichi*) is entirely available, perfectly ready to be used. No spiritual affinity is needed; no veneration is necessary. And no particular sympathy for the Romans is required. If for Mantegna and Alberti the revival of the architecture of the Roman past is the product of a choice

rooted in a profound admiration for the civilization of ancient Rome, then the predilection of Bramante is entirely deprived of any moral judgement. Whatever the message, the repertoire that can be decoded in the Roman *campagna* simply provides a more efficient grammar. And it is precisely because of his complete indifference that Bramante is capable of looking at the architecture of the Romans with the detachment that allows one to gain complete control over it. Bramante just puts himself in the position of learning from the Romans; it is he who defines the presuppositions for the most realistic exploitation of the available assets. His approach to the past is strategically superior because of its unprejudiced pragmatism. When Bramante walks *solitario e cogitativo* among the ruins, he resembles a colonel in need of precise information in order to conquer a position on a hilltop much more than a lover inspired by some sort of romantic fascination with the past. In the end, this difference – the great one that distinguishes Bramante from Alberti and Mantegna, and even from Raphael and Palladio, and that defines him as a conscious non-revivalist – is a difference with regard to the category of phenomena Bramante is interested in looking at. Indeed, Bramante does not look *at* the architecture of the past; instead, he looks *through* the architecture of the past.

After a few years in Rome, the classical repertoire ceases to be a problem for Bramante. Bramante is, with respect to the classical repertoire, in the same position Lenin is in after the October Revolution, and the same one as St Paul after Christ's resurrection. The fundamental event has already happened; the fundamental tool has already been discovered. For Bramante, the architectural language is given. The challenge is thus simply a question of using it to articulate space. And the fact that architectural language is given means, first of all, that there is no need to invent, and secondly, that there is no merit in not inventing. Classicism is not a tradition (and, most importantly, it is not *our* tradition). For Bramante, classicism is simply the conscious idea of a universal architecture, one that cannot exclude anything and thus should remain as abstract as possible.

Bramante's research is logical, for he occupies himself with matters of grammar – with rules, with cases – and political, for his work is preoccupied with multitudes, with agreement, with chance, with weakness, with violence, with arbitrariness. All of his research on this dialectic of laws and exceptions – the one none of his contemporaries could avoid, from Erasmus and Machiavelli through Luther and Galileo – is carried out as architectural research, as a true phenomenology of space

in which space is suspended and then explored in its infinite possible configurations.

It is with respect to this dialectic of laws and exceptions, which implies the opposition but also the complementarity of the two terms it associates, that the specific abstraction of Bramante's architecture needs to be understood. Abstraction is both the method and the goal. Abstraction is the goal because Bramante's architecture aims to expose a universal manner of organizing space, but it is also the method, for it is the indifference to style, content and message that allows architectural "language" to address the multiplicity of reality. The given constraints in any specific situation (e.g., the decorative obsession of Lombard craftsmen, the limits of building plots, the hasty nature of a cultural project bound to the life of an ageing pope and an equally old architect) are neither ignored nor opposed. Instead, Bramante operates on another level, assuming all of the conditions of a given situation as equivalent aspects of an intellectual project that is simply aiming to combine all of the desires crowded around the architectural object into a single unified configuration. Bramante's logical-political construction is developed as a material one: the agreement is built into space. And the construction of this agreement is then exposed as space – indirectly, in a somehow distorted manner – as an empty cast produced by operating upon solid substance. Thus, the problem Bramante addresses is just one, the logical-political anticipation of the possibilities enclosed within the void.

The problem of Bramante is a political problem: the problem of the definition of a series of architectural decisions that could correspond to their specific circumstances without compromising the universal language. Bramante understands this task as political – and so obviously plural – both in its scope (the production of spaces that could be used and remembered by a multitude) and in its method (the "construction" of the agreement of all subjects involved through the building process). Bramante's work is political also because it is not only addressed to a multitude, but also produced by a multitude of authors. Bramante is merely the editor of a collective artistic effort. This is why, for Bramante, the rigorous universality and the absolute abstraction of the architectural language is systematically combined with a tolerance of outside interference. The laws are constantly defied by chance, while the universal language is constantly reacting to a multitude of dialects. In each specific set of circumstances, Bramante accepts the specificity of his task as a challenge to expand the realm of

the universal language. No case can be ignored. And every time a new challenge presents itself, then the language needs to become more and more abstract, more and more detached and general. In each circumstance, Bramante sets himself the goal of showing that architecture can find a solution without starting over from scratch, without arriving at conclusions that would declare somebody an enemy.

Bramante's architectural project presents itself as a series of political decisions, as a series of decisions about issues that are only partially known, as an elaboration of uncertainty, as labour, as a reflection on the unavoidable violence of choosing. In Bramante, the awareness of this fragility turns into the production of spaces that systematically display a lack of stability, a lack of reality, a lack of foundations. In the very moment that he impresses the viewer with his spectacle of spaces, Bramante also disappoints him by leaving him suspended in an extremely uncomfortable position. Space is produced and then immediately dissolved. Reality and illusion are constantly played off against each other, somehow proving each other wrong.

And, of course, Bramante's project fails. As much as he rediscovers an entirely new *scale* for contemporary architecture, and as much as he may succeed in imposing his agenda upon all of the architects of the following hundred years, the universal language never really materializes and remains merely a promise. The land that is conquered never becomes firmly held territory. The coach turns back into a pumpkin. And yet Bramante also speaks – and to a certain extent, more clearly – through his failure. Conquerors are, indeed, always eventually vanquished, their empires doomed to vanish. And the humanity of Bramante's work lies in his constant confrontation with failure, in his explicit investigation of failure – what could almost be seen as his recasting of failure as the supreme human achievement. Bramante conquers the empire simply in order to burn all its provinces in a colossal cultural potlatch. The tenderness of his ruthless military campaign is the tenderness of failure – the fragility of his unbelievable ambition, the desperation of his colossal(ly) bad jokes, the humour and the stubbornness with which the unavoidable and nonsensical project of a universal architecture is pushed to the extreme.

So, happy birthday, Bramante – and fuck you.