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The fourteen critical essays included in the book explore the work of architects who have significantly interpreted the layering of history and memory in the contemporary context: Paulo David, Marcio Kogan, Cristián Undurraga, Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates, Kengo Kuma, Solano Benítez, Angelo Bucci, Ángela García de Paredes and Ignacio Pedrosa, Níall McLaughlin, João Nunes, Rafael Moneo, Sean Godsell, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Diébedo Francis Kéré.

The volume aims at critically reflecting on the work of these protagonists of the international architecture culture, who have lectured within the Mantovarchitettura programme and fostered the debate between professional experience and university teaching.



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70.11 Layers of Contemporary Architecture
edited by Luigi Spinelli

Architectural Design and History

Layers of Contemporary Architecture

edited by
Luigi Spinelli

FrancoAngeli

Luigi Spinelli is Full Professor in Architectural and Urban Design at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano.

Architectural Design and History

Layers of Contemporary Architecture

The Bookseries *Architectural Design and History* intends to explore the relationships between architectural design and the contemporary city, with a particular focus on the contexts where urban transformations relate to the preservation and promotion of historical heritage. By intersecting various theories, techniques and practices, the contributions aim at unfolding the complex identity of the architectural culture, fostering connections and exchanges among different disciplines, and enhancing a strategical and evolutionary conception of architectural heritage.

The Bookseries is promoted by the Polo Territoriale di Mantova of Politecnico di Milano, which is the seat of the UNESCO Chair in Architectural Preservation and Planning in World Heritage Cities. All the published volumes undergo a blind peer-review process, which the Scientific Committee manages through the cooperation of qualified external referees.

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edited by
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**Layers of
Contemporary Architecture**
edited by Luigi Spinelli

Editorial coordination
Elena Montanari

Graphic design
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Layers

Luigi Spinelli

- A layer of whitish clay
a band of clayey sand
a layer of volcanic dust
a deposit of marine debris
a perforated limestone vein
from infiltrations of high saline rate
a red Cretaceous syncline
on a bed of Precambrian moraines
a considerable mantle of lava
that presses on the clay made shale
a layer of pure silicates
over a vein of metamorphic gneiss
a lava flow of magmatic granite
a late Devonian raid
another granite rich in feldspar
whole eras weighing on the last ones
traces of life on this planet

In 1968, the Argentine poet Juan Rodolfo Wilcock describes the heterogeneity of the unstoppable deposit of time, with an insistent image that can metaphorically represent the aspects with which the contemporary project is confronted with the theme of memory. The outcomes of this book show, to those who want to look at them, a research that does not renounce a reflection on the stratification of experiences and cultures. The result of the deposit of collective or personal contents in contemporary architecture constitutes its theoretical depth, contributes to the representation of an image, organizes its constitutive hierarchy, establishes a relationship with the context.

In its more material sense, which refers to the images of geology, the overlapping generated by sedimentation respects an established order and a positional hierarchy. The oldest layers are on the bottom; more and more recent ones cover them over time. Each stratiform element is identifiable by characters of distinctive identity and homogeneity, and it has consolidated in a recognizable portion of time and in constant physical conditions. This result of the overlapping action constitutes a protected legacy, which in human work is not only a sort

of secured bank deposit, but above all is the useful result of patience and experience over time.

The tectonic layering is present in the Madeira landscape in which Paulo David operates — a physical overlap of pergola terraces and split stone retaining walls, engraved by the narrow paths of local crops. It is also the sedimentation of stories, traditions and cultural meanings, visible in the signs of a strong nature, harsh in its elements. The materials of this difficultly passable landscape, constantly subjected to confrontation with the wild force of nature, are the liquid volcanic lava, violently cooled in contact with a second material: the water conveyed by sudden streams and the surrounding ocean, bearing at the same time danger and luck. A fusion of basalt stone characterizes the rugged surfaces of the island's limits as well as the textures of the black and white stone houses of the historic center. David shows a deep and sensitive knowledge of the traces of this territory, a deep bond rooted with intensity, that does not allow for transformations, but rather always integrations through analogue references to materials and colors. The architect's action works in section in the redesign of the territory, transversely with respect to the geological layering.

From the beginning of this century, also the approach of the Brazilian architect Marcio Kogan shows more and more interest in the theme of layering over time. It is an approach that relies on a paratactic model, based on a composition generated by the juxtaposition of closed and independent elements. This re-composition process does not concern the themes of typological evolution or hybridization: each element rigorously maintains its own autonomy, in a balance that respects the formal abstraction of each component. The design approach, however, alludes to addition rather than to transformation, as occurs in buildings following the juxtaposition of interventions in the depth of a time span, during which they acquire memory and the possibility of narration. This relationship with history — or rather with «apocryphal temporality» — has been effectively reflected in the projects of the last decade, in the redevelopment and addition to existing historical structures: in Rio de Janeiro, in the transformation of an early 20th century industrial building into a multifunctional cultural complex connected to the Municipal Theater, and in the Barcelona

Diagonal, in the recovery of a 1960s Modernist building by the Swiss architect Saugey, with the new identity of «the Squirrel».

Cristián Undurraga knows the lesson of the geography of his land: he possesses the aware instinct of the continuous silent activity of the earth, even when this does not manifest itself dramatically in a real earthquake. This multi-layered geography is a constant inspiration towards the knowledge of a unique landscape, which fosters the dialogue between nature and the work of men. The constructive sincerity of the *Capilla del Retiro* results into the construction of the liturgical space with only two archetypal elements: an excavation in the ground, bearing an archaeological memory, and a roof that assumes the modern image of a light device. From the awareness of the underground restlessness of this geography, a constructive sensitivity and a simplification to the minimum terms of the elements of the composition naturally derive, which are translated into a formal expression and in the adoption of an essential technology, such as that of laminated wood. Undurraga bases his ethical approach to his research on the theme of construction, extended to architecture and public spaces as well as to social housing, with a community sensitivity that he himself identifies as «the art of building hospitality».

In the practice of Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates it is a legacy of unwritten rules that comes from the training, experience and sensitivity of the two architects. A practice that manifests itself in the expression of a layered tectonics, drawing on the volumes of their urban architectures through calibrated overlappings and combinations of different architectural elements and materials, between pre-existing and new interventions. Thus in the Urban Housing and Crèche, in Geneva, the compact angular volume is modulated in overlapping parts by the supporting frame, each of which describes the program in a simple way. In the expansion of a 19th century school in the Public Library in Blankenberge, the extreme variety of the interior spaces is expressed towards the city through the size of the superimposed windows in the tectonic layering of the façade. Both architectures are characterized by a careful dialogue with the surrounding buildings, based on the interpretation of their respective urban atmospheres. The ability of the architects to recognize and assimilate the specific aspects of a place, whether expressed by architectural characteristics and rhythms or by

cultural and social sharing, shows a necessary assumption of responsibility in the intervention on the heritage.

When the layer, by revealing the infinitesimal dimension of the elements deposited in it, becomes thinner until it becomes a veil, or a film, until it loses the characteristics of thickness and opacity, we can speak of overlaying. This type of layering manifests itself in meteorology — where the layer is a uniform horizontal cloud of such thickness as to let the light of the sun or the moon shine through — or in ecology — where the living forms of a particular environment live in layers at different altitudes, depending on the needs of natural light or humidity. In the artistic disciplines, the fresco and watercolor techniques overlay a glaze that highlights the grain of the support. The work of a contemporary artist like Emilio Isgrò does not only involve the subtraction of words, but rather it involves the physical operation of the overlaying of a thin layer of paint or ink on the paper sheet or canvas. Marcel Duchamp conducted experiments in the field of photography throughout his artistic activity, going beyond the action of the machine that picks up fragments of reality with the direct intervention of the photographer, to verify new potentialities. The adjective ultrathin, or *inframine*, concerns incorporeal phenomena that cannot be perceived directly, except by the human brain, and opens to the fourth dimension. Duchamp describes some examples of this immateriality: the space between the front and the back of a sheet of paper, the people who cross the subway doors at the last moment, the X-rays, the reflections of light on surfaces and mirrors, a painting on glass seen from the unpainted side. In cinematographic projections, the montage and superimposition experiments in René Claire's film *Entr'Acte* use images that refer to each other in order to evoke, with the use of fading, something more than what they show. Through the reference to many and different practices, this type of layering can be described as the overlay of images so thin as to be transparent, enabling the projection of the underlying layers, enriching the vision with vibration and movement, involving imagination and dream.

Similarly, in Kengo Kuma's design method, the layering of memory refers to the concept of deposit of small particles or fragments, the infinitesimal units of which our universe is built. Kuma observed

this in the spontaneous villages of the Sahara and in the work of wood craftsmen in Japan. This theory of discretization, of mathematical origin and organic results, manifests itself in several aspects. First of all, it appears in compliance with the artisanal tradition of using wood in construction, with a contemporary interpretation, advanced tools of computational design and a parametric approach — as in the Sunny Hills store in Tokyo. Kuma claims the democratic nature of a construction process based on small and light elements, within the reach of anyone who is not a professional. Secondly, discretization manifests itself in the mnemonic relationship with nature through its abstraction in the primordial call to protection, and through its balance with it by means of the reduction of elements, surfaces and spaces to a human scale. In the simple architecture of *Kodama* at *Arte Sella*, Kuma adds the void, an oriental element, to the four elements of Western philosophy. Finally, it manifests itself in the recovery of the relationship between architecture and the human scale of the built environment, through the adoption of topological figures, regardless of the size of the elements, and the concept of topography — applied in the Victoria and Albert Museum in Dundee, where the concrete washed with water evokes the natural randomness of the rock and the lamellar element on the facade constitutes the smallest unit of measurement.

Solano Benítez's approach, in analogy with that of Kengo Kuma, works on the discretization of minute elements: instead of wood, he applies it through the use of the brick, the *ladrillo*. An apparently modest material, which has not exhausted the expressiveness of its multiple values. Benitez enhances its potential with a personal search for new and unconventional solutions at the service of a technique and a constructive use that is renewed and verified in any professional experience. The Paraguayan architect thus maintains a strong bond with the territory and with the local culture, starting from the resources and skills available on site. At the same time, he projects this traditional material towards the future, infusing it with a new authenticity, with new employment prospects. Above all, and unlike others, he is not pleased with the aesthetic result, but acts on the production, redeeming the conditions of an economically underdeveloped context by means of experimental and innovative ways of organizing the construction site.

The process to which the work of Angelo Bucci relies on refers to the theme of the projection, that crosses the layers of the operational phases of the architectural project. The overlay of several working tools that are not mutually exclusive — freehand sketches, technical and computerized drawings, physical and digital models — accompanies the projection into the third dimension of volumetric consequentialities, the sequence of ideas and the control of strategies. It is in this structure of thought that the architect faces the «challenge» of the design. One of the constant elements of this projective process is the topography of the place, which in Bucci's houses is not opposed nor modified, but rather is involved and supported in the process of foundation and simultaneous re-signification of the ground. The way of going through these architectures overturns the traditional section, rooted on the ground and growing upwards, adopts the slopes and irregularities of the ground as an element of the place with a projective value, and establishes new paths and new privacy gradients through the use of layers and terraces. This attitude is also supported by the theme of the threshold, the interface between inside and outside, which is inserted in the paths at the points where the relationship with the landscape is set. Bucci's assertion «there are many doors and many ways to get through them», and the admiration for the architecture of Vilanova Artigas, where «you simply don't know whether you are inside or outside», explain the architect's interest.

A stratigraphy deeply perforates the layers to reconstruct the dating of the overlapping phases, through the analysis of their homogeneity, consistency and arrangement. Hybrid materials resurface from the depths — as in an overturned version of the *Cretto* by Burri — as they are made up in different moments and situations, mixed and contaminated with each other, evidence of the cyclical character of history. A bit like what has happened in recent decades in the social and economic fields, with the remixing of the vertical overlapping of income brackets or classes, due to globalization. Important indicators emerge in the section of the excavation, such as fossils, testifying to previous forms of life, or incoherent and unconsolidated joints that testify to a sudden fracture in the overlapping. The design and research in architecture have the ability to revive the buried layers and re-

compose them in a new surface design, to act in section by overlapping writings, to probe the interstices caused by discontinuities.

The archaeological layers are the material with which Angela García de Paredes and Ignacio García Pedrosa are often confronted, being frequently engaged in contexts characterized by the deposit of history. Their design approach is not limited to an intelligent – and not self-representative – reading of the complexities of each specific context; above all it shows the ability to intertwine and make visible symbolic relationships and references among the different temporal layers of a place, in a dialogue between tradition and innovation. Their vision of time is articulated, it reads not only its continuity but also its lacerations, distortions and scars. Their approach sometimes operates with the adoption of a particular material, or with historical citations or urban references; it transforms their architectures into devices that visualize time in space. The results do not correspond to a frozen museum practice, nor to the work of the archaeologist. By renewing the culture of the project in historical contexts, they show the ability to graft the previous phases into the current life of the city, renewing the history of the site with an episode of its own time.

The architectures of Niall McLaughlin – the Centre for Contemporary Irish Culture in Kenmare and the projects for the Scotland Wing Extension and the Welcome Building of the Auckland Castle – have a contemporary identity of their own, and are representative of the meanings and motivations that generated them. At the same time, events and meanings of the past, belonging to the world of forms, emerge from the layering of collective memory. These architectures therefore take on a narrative value, and tell parables: the imaginary is confronted with reality and, by reappearing in the project through the architect's evocative vocabulary, it inspires and recomposes new future meanings. To engage in temporal stratification by assuming, through analogy, values that go beyond the sequence between past and future, involves a reflection on the history and life of architecture, and on the meanings of the forms of the past. This method reminds us of the image of the old Finn – in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* – who, lying on the bank of the Anna Liffey river, observes the history of Ireland and the world deposited along the river of life passing through his mind.

João Nunes works on spaces of transition and overlapping of meaning, which result from the re-emergence of temporal layering and once again in play for a new role. His research is based on strategies of interaction and rebalancing between the system of natural values and the forms of human settlement action. Interaction is intended as a mediation practice between complex situations and different occasions, as an activity of research and recognition of the processes of anthropization and transformation of the territory and the identity traces that have overlapped and integrated over time, as well as a project strategy for the recomposition of settlement paths. The scale is that of the landscape project, due to the relationships and variety of the elements involved. An example of this recomposition approach is the reconfiguration of the morphology of the Alcântara Valley and of the numerous elements it includes, enhancing the stratification of the signs that characterize the slopes at different altitudes. Another example is the intervention of the Ourém Linear Park, which re-orientates the connections and redefines the margins, in search of new uses and a new identity of the place.

If the layer is constituted by the deposit of events, and if these, by settling down, become memories, the overlapping becomes the recorded trace of time and memory, something like a musical track that intertwines or overlaps with numerous others. The reactions to this backup of memory can be different: the habit of normal daily life, which is repeated every day, with its same spaces and objects, the wounds of the violence of war or the relentlessness of nature, inflicted on the surface of things, the persistence and indelibility of images and places, or the ability to re-read, listen to or view again, at different times, hence obtaining deep and different emotions.

The meaning that Rafael Moneo gives to memory is that of a layering based on a continuous and unstoppable flow, where modernity will also settle, by becoming the last layer of self-awareness. The layering of memory becomes the trace for the action of the contemporary architect, through the reworking of the more or less permanent phenomena of the past: typology, shape, materials, language. Moneo's architectural culture is able to produce an extremely wealthy range of meanings, with the help of the abstraction of the messages of the past,

and achieves modern formal results without betraying the original values. At the same time, it expresses itself with evident materiality and constructive clarity. His experience denies self-referentiality, and adapts to a personal interpretation of different places, situations and contexts. This happens for example in the Madrid Atocha Station, with the interpretation of a representative typology such as that of the railway station through the changes and needs that evolved over time. Moneo's architectures therefore fit into the rhythmic flow of time, or «dance» in time and space, as Josep Questglas says, with the freedom to reflect on how time is one of the most powerful variables for a designer.

Sean Godsell's action is characterized by an incremental method of patient layering of his research over time, an overlapping of heterogeneous references, direct or indirect, which may come from the experience of an architect or from personal imagery. A first family of references ensues from the study on the evolution of building types, not only of the settlement model originating in Australia but also of other Western specificities. The project for the Carter/Tucker House, for example, stems from a reflection on the transformation of the relationship between some parts that constitute the house, between the distribution corridor and the veranda understood in different cultures. A second source of reference is the lesson of the masters of the long history of Western architecture, from Michelangelo to Palladio to Le Corbusier, as it appears in the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Design Hub. The dialogue with the past is also expressed through the knowledge of the identity characters of the territory and of the multifaceted culture in which Godsell operates: in Australia, where the colonial culture is intertwined with the aboriginal one, different traditions overlap and alternate in the way of building and living. The House in the Hills in Barrabool is an example of this application of the characteristics of the territory. By interweaving architecture and history, Godsell adopts a methodological attitude where the role of time becomes important, understood as a place of memory but also a place for experimenting with the needs of contemporaneity.

In the daily practice of the Brazilian architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha, the question about the meaning of making architecture is constantly present. This attitude also has to do with the record of time in

the architect's work, in this important political tool for transforming human life on our planet. The ways in which this practice is carried out research the structural aspects and the memory of tradition and popular culture, rather than the formal and intellectualistic aspects, and are reinvented in each project, in the face of the available resources, seeking the adhesion between one's actions and thinking. Over time Mendes da Rocha has refined his poetics and his thoughts on the world and its absurdities, moving more and more towards essentiality, carrying out a continuous search for coherence in practice and refining his ability to associate his architectures to images that are powerful and full of memory.

Finally, if there is a way of interpreting the memory of places through the contemporary spaces of everyday life, this happens in the architecture of Diébédo Francis Kéré. His creations are strongly rooted in the specific community identity and building culture of Burkina Faso, in the conditions of light and shadow, in the colors and in the simple and effective geometries of his land. The memory of the places is revealed in each of its architectures through the materials available on site, such as laterite, a rock rich in iron and aluminum, that give it a reddish color, or eucalyptus wood, which are renewed with the aim of an updating of technology and image. The ability to interpret the memory of the primitive tradition and the primary needs for protection from the environment in which Kéré operates, are thus summarized through a contemporary language that also owes a lot to its European formation.



I Alta Valle Bormida, 2003,
ph. Marco Introini.