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AVANT-GARDE: INVENTION OF THE FUTURE OR A RETURN TO ORDER?

AWANGARDA: WYMYŚLANIE PRZYSZŁOŚCI CZY POWRÓT DO STAREGO PORZĄDKU?

Abstract

The twentieth century has taught us that avant-garde movements are cyclical and constitute a necessary solution of continuity with the present time so as to invent the future. A future that requires an indirect vision to avoid the petrifying gaze of the Gorgon. Time reveals whether and to what extent the avant-garde has constituted its vital and imaginative impetus towards the future, or if it has accepted to be an unconscious instrument of a return to the status quo ante.

Keywords: avant-gardes, future, architecture, fourth dimension, urban utopias

Streszczenie:

XX w. nauczył nas, że ruchy awangardowe są cykliczne i stanowią o ciągłości teraźniejszości z wymyśleniem przyszłości. Przyszłości, która wymaga pośredniej wizji, aby uniknąć spojrzenia zamieniającego w kamień Gorgony. Czas pokazuje, czy i w jakim stopniu awangarda stanowi żywotny i obdarzony wyobraźnią impuls ku przyszłości, czy też przyjęła się jako nieświadomy instrument powrotu do status quo ante.

Słowa kluczowe: awangardy, przyszłość, architektura, czwarty wymiar, utopie urbanistyczne

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in a historical moment in which the birth of new political ideologies would have radically changed the fate of Europe, the artistic avant-gardes questioned the deep meaning of art and its relationship with society, experimenting new languages and new forms of expression.

So as to define in extreme synthesis, for the purposes of our reflection, the common characteristics of avant-garde architecture – from Italian Futurism to Russian Constructivism, up to German Expressionism – we could take the search for formal freedom and dynamic vision of space as a common denominator.

Today, by questioning ourselves on the legacy of these experiences, we can essentially identify two registers through which evaluate their relevance: the new conception of space linked to the fourth dimension and urban utopias, areas of research based on the new potential of technology and on the standardization of industrial civilization.

Among the architects trained in this singular historical moment, the figures of Le Corbusier and Mies, in particular, allow us to understand how the most interesting experiments of the

architectural avant-gardes have not always pursued the logic of the *tabula rasa* in prefiguring visions for the future, but have also turned their gaze to the past.

In the projects for the skyscrapers on Friedrichstrasse in Berlin (1922), Mies investigates the relationship between light, form and matter; the transparent, plastic and continuous envelope reveals unexpected expressive possibilities of glass. As a result, the research will find fulfillment, over thirty years later, in the austere stereometry of the Seagram building (1958) in New York.

Mies' radical research continued in the same years with other projects. In the brick country house (1924), the wall structure is broken down into a sequence of independent partitions that define an absolutely new spatial *continuum*.

The *Glasraum* in Stuttgart, a small-scale project developed in 1927 together with collaborator Lilly Reich, appears as an anticipation of the most complete experimentation of the German pavilion. Light glass partitions which, thanks to the progress of an increasingly refined industrial production, coincide with the only compositional tools in the definition of a suggestive spatial abstraction, independent from the tectonic structure of the *Gewerbehalle* housing it. The same frosted glass devices, in a gray and green color, which Mies introduced only a few years later as an addition to the precious onyx and travertine walls of the Barcelona Pavilion (1929), in which space is no longer defined by the wall envelope, but with by flat roof. This compositional strategy also characterizes the projects for courtyard houses of the same years, a modern invention of an architectural archetype. The research, carried out with the rupture of the wall box, therefore returns to the origins of the architectural type, far to the ontology of the building. As Antonio Monestiroli clarifies:

Mies is the architect who most refers to the principles of ancient architecture and moves away from its forms. The three-court house contains all the historical depth of the house, although even primary elements such as doors and windows are omitted in this project. A roof and a fence remain, and yet in this house the old house is recognizable, 'the sound of ancient songs echoes in it'.¹

In *Vers une architecture* (1923), Le Corbusier uses a new communicative format that becomes a powerful propaganda tool. His idea of architecture is based on the innovations of construction techniques that allow to introduce a free spatial arrangement, theorized in the "Five points of a new architecture".

Through effective metaphors he clarifies the instrumental value of technique for architecture. The distribution rationality of the steamship cabins, the most advanced technologies of the aeronautical industry and the standardization of the automotive industry are all references for a renewed idea of living summarized in the famous slogan: *la maison est une machine à habiter*.

Another programmatic point of the Swiss master is the *promenade architecturale*, which introduces the time factor into the perception of architectural space, an evident legacy of the sensorial dynamism of the Futurists and the fourth dimension of Cubists.

Le Corbusier's theoretical reflection then focuses on the urban dimension.

In the project for a city of 3 million inhabitants (1922), he specifies the principles of his idea of a contemporary metropolis: an urban system decongested by vehicular traffic with large spaces for nature. It would have found then application in the *Plan Voisin* for Paris, in

¹ A. Monestiroli, *Le forme e il tempo* [in:] L. Hilberseimer, A. Monestiroli (eds), *Mies van der Rohe*, CittàStudiEdizioni, Torino 2003, p. 16. English translation from Italian by the author.

which he plans to reconstruct the right bank, razing the historical fabric to the ground (including the Marais) with the exception of some monuments and squares, which constitute for him a selective and radical memory of the historic city. This sensitivity for the past resurfaces in a different form in other architectural or urban works.

There remain some realized fragments of all the utopian power of Le Corbusier's projects which still restore the subversive force of the architectural avant-gardes of the twentieth century.

As the architectural historian Renato De Fusco explains:

the architectural avant-garde, working on drawings and projects, also remains unrealized, but nevertheless provides us with an image of what the authors intended to do [...]. The Corbusian pre-planning is a world of figurations, ideograms, symbols, schemes that sometimes, with the help of a caption, become understandable to everyone. [...] Le Corbusier is not only able to establish the prerequisites, but also to hypothesize solutions that are beyond the architecture allowed by the use, by the laws, by the techniques in force. It is perhaps also by virtue of this attitude that Le Corbusier is to be considered the initiator of that architectural trend known as the poetics of large dimensions, of macrostructures, or the initiator of an open architectural design. [...] The major contemporary architects have contributed to the definition of a similar trend: from K. Tange, with the Tokyo plan, to L. Kahn, with the arrangement of the center of Philadelphia, among the various utopian proposals of the Metabolism group, by L. Nycz, by Y. Friedman, by Maymont, etc., all focused on the idea of macrostructures and open design.²

For De Fusco, therefore, the most significant legacy of Le Corbusier's *recherche patiente* is the utopia of large dimensions, a theme the most significant European neo-avant-gardes of the 60s and 70s of the last century measured against. Among them we should mention Superstudio's "radical architecture" which arouses the interest of international critics with the 1972 exhibition at the MoMA in New York *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*.

Superstudio questions the imminent dissolution and fate of architecture in the age of electronics and globalization, through an imaginative narrative that proceeds with drawings and photomontages. An experiment that ended in the early 1980s, a period in which Superstudio tackled concrete issues in projects including the Alzate Brianza Bank (1978), the Electro-counting Center in Zola Predosa (1979), the Novoli University Center (1993), the new Museo dell'Opera of Florence (2004) or the urban centers built in Holland. The temporal trajectory of the researches of Superstudio and its founder Adolfo Natalini implements a reversal of the initial point of view, passing from the radical speculation to the built architecture, confronting with the tradition of civil architecture and with the time of history. Natalini says:

We need architecture to be appropriate to places and inhabitants, resistant to time and fashions, reassuring against the rapid passage of time to protect us from the offenses of the seasons and men. We need solid, protective, reassuring architectures, dignified and civil architectures. We need places whose shape is born slowly over time through needs and desires.³

² D.R. Fusco, *Progettazione*, Treccani, Enciclopedia del Novecento, 1980. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/progettazione_%28Enciclopedia-del-Novecento%29/ (access: 20.06.2022). English translation from Italian by the author.

³ A. Natalini cit. in Annigoni F., In memory of Professor Adolfo Natalini, <https://www.dida.unifi.it/art-486-in-memoria-del-prof-adolfo-natalini.html> (access: 20.06.22). English translation from Italian by the author.

If Superstudio's parable ends with a return to the reality of places, his radical experiments have nevertheless inspired some of the most innovative architects of our time, such as Rem Koolhaas, one of the few who questions the evolution of settlement features of planet, constantly shifting one's point of view.

In his text *Delirious New York* (1978), the Dutch architect analyzes a singular urban phenomenon which, since its inception, has enhanced the potential and limits of the contemporary metropolitan condition. For Koolhaas, Manhattan constitutes the theoretical foundation of all modern urban culture as it represents the *ante litteram* prophecy of a "culture of congestion" based on image and consumption. A text which, moreover, constitutes a radical critique of Le Corbusier's urban planning theories.

"Le Corbusier's task is clear" – as Koolhaas wrote –

before he can deliver the city with which he is pregnant, he has to prove that it does not yet exist. To establish the birthright of his brainchild, he has to destroy New York's credibility, kill the glamorous sparkle of its modernity. [...] But despite Le Corbusier's frantic efforts to outdistance Manhattan, the only way to describe his new city – verbally and even visually – is in terms of its differences from Manhattan. [...] Le Corbusier has after all not swallowed Manhattan. Manhattanism has choked on, but finally digested, Le Corbusier.⁴

Koolhaas' reflection continues with *S, M, L, XL* (1997) and *Junkspace* (2006), texts addressing the theme of "bigness" in contemporary architecture with an effective communication format, certainly indebted to the Le Corbusier essay.

A further advance is represented by the urban analysis, conducted from the late 1990s onwards, on the megalopolis of Lagos in Nigeria. Koolhaas proposes a methodological overturning with respect to planning, pursuing the idea that the project on the city can identify strategies by borrowing the settlement principles from the analysis of spontaneous unplanned urban phenomena and assuming the urban informal of contemporary megacities as an unavoidable feature of our time.

Once again architecture, in a globalized world, has the power to project its visions towards the future.

The twentieth century has taught us that avant-gardes movements are cyclical and constitute a necessary solution of continuity with the present time so as to invent the future. A future that requires an indirect vision to avoid the petrifying gaze of the Gorgon. Time reveals whether and to what extent the avant-garde has constituted its vital and imaginative impetus towards the future, or if it has accepted to be an unconscious instrument of a return to the *status quo ante*.

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⁴ R. Koolhaas, *Europeans: Biuer! Dali and Le Corbusier Conquer New York* [in:] idem, *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, New York 1994, pp. 235–281.

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