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Forgetting Architecture — Investigations into the Poetic Experience of Architecture

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ABSTRACT. To forget architecture means to show that architecture is not solely related to the execution of a functional plan but is also a creation whose shapes possess a material order as well as an emotional, historical and symbolic one. Architecture is different from construction in that it is the expression of the human need to occupy space and to possess and dwell in places created for life, gods and history. Architecture is a stage (Rossi), which is to say that we are dealing with the conditions that permit life to manifest itself in all its ambiguity and uncertainty. For this reason, architecture must be uncertain and ambiguous. Forgetting architecture means neither that its rigour and precision should be abandoned nor that the development of construction strategies and methods is unimportant. In this case, forgetting serves to highlight three aspects: 1) man does not inhabit abstract spaces but places that are configured by taking into account the most common human activities and experiences; 2) architecture is the expression of a way of thinking (Wittgenstein); 3) architecture should become invisible in the name of human experiences and actions; in other words, architecture extends a form of life.

> *"There was a time when I experienced architecture without thinking about it."*
>
> (Zumthor)

> *"In order to be significant, architecture must be forgotten."*
>
> (Rossi)

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1. Introduction

Forgetting architecture means showing that architecture is not solely related to the execution of a function but is also a creation whose shape possesses a material order as well as an emotional, historical and symbolic one. Architecture is different from construction in that it is the expression of the human need to occupy space and to possess and dwell in places created for life, gods and history.

According to Rossi's poetic-architectonic intuition, architecture is a stage, which is to say that we are dealing with the conditions that permit life to manifest itself in all its ambiguity and uncertainty. For this reason, architecture must be *uncertain and ambiguous,* which does not refer to any kind of imprecision but the demand that each building must always have some emptiness and incompleteness that can only be fulfilled by a certain human dwelling, its history and demands.

Forgetting architecture means neither that its rigor and precision should be abandoned in favor of a pure poetics of construction, nor that the development of construction strategies, methods and technologies is unimportant.

But it serves to highlight three aspects:

1. Man does not inhabit abstract, geometrical, transcendental and absolute spaces but places that are configured by the most common human activities and experiences.

2. Architecture is the expression of a way of thinking whose sphere should be described, a thought process that is not technical but related to the presence of man on earth, and in this respect "architecture is like philosophy" (Wittgenstein).

3. Architecture should disappear and be forgotten in order for life to happen, that is, architectural "objects" should become invisible in the name of human experiences and actions; or to use a Wittgenstein concept, architecture is a form of life.

In what follows I will discuss these 3 points moving from the identification of the original conflict in architecture, to the discussion of architecture as

a way of looking at things and finally to Zumthor's poetic demand that one lives architecture without noticing it.

2. Architecture: between Logic and Contingency

We can consider that the original conflict in architecture is the one between a will-to-order *versus* construction, use and site. These opposing modalities organize much of architectural discourse, theory and practice. In the first one we have a kind of architectonic *a priori* that independently of any kind of resistance (empirical, material) forces a certain form. A desire of the dreamed design, an ambition for the materialization of the primary abstraction and model. Not planned according to a certain experience, but driven by an ideal solution. In this, any kind of alteration of the original is understood as a deviation and disorder. But any architect [and in this respect any artist] will know that absolute materialization of the desired form is impossible and architecture is an ambivalent process between the design abstraction and the concrete conditions of construction and use.

Jan Turnovksy describes this situation in terms of the relation of architecture with the conceptual and the concrete existing orders:

> When architecture follows an abstract concept, it is defined by a categorical compositional will-to-order. The alternative approach produces architecture that is committed to concrete existing conditions related to constructions, use or site; in this case, compositional intentions and rules — to the degree that they are even evoked — are subject to, or diverted by, such contingencies [...]. In the first case we have rigid geometry and absolute order, with forms and alignments that disregard contingent conditions — a heroic distancing of the man-made from the natural. In the second case there is a casual pragmatism, an almost ad hoc, incidental accommodation of anomalous and unique conditions.[1]

In a certain sense we can speak of the need for negativity and for the accident that form a fundamental ambivalence experienced in architecture.

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[1] Turnosky, Jan, (2009) *The Poetics of a Wall Projection*, p. 21

There is a moment when one can no longer speak of functions, forms or construction logic and is confronted with an undetermined space. And it is precisely in this fundamental ambivalence that Jan Turnovksy places the poetic of architecture.

> The fundamental poetics that emerge from the continual oscillations between pragmatic and aesthetical functions, which can tip even the most straightforward object into a state of ambiguity.[2]

The ambiguity here under discussion is related to a fundamental distinction in architecture, a kind of two opposing tendencies, or factors. This opposition is between structure and individual elements or accidents; in philosophical terms, the question here is the polarity between logic-conceptual and the empirical or, if one prefers, between formal and material.

In terms of the discussion of architecture we are dealing here with, the main opposition that is the one that exists between architecture as object and architecture as scenario or landscape. This original ambiguity is not an accident or something one must fight to get rid off, but it is this ambiguity that allows the life of architecture and its relation with the various forms of life. These are the reasons why for Aldo Rossi architecture should retain this ambiguity (which can be seen asessential) at its core and as one of its primal forces. I will get back to Rossi, but it is important to further characterize the mentioned architectonic primal conflict.

3. Wittgenstein in Architecture: a House Turned Logic

Wittgenstein plays an important role in the argument being developed here. And for two main reasons: first, because of the role the house he designed and built plays in my discussion and second because of his later very brief writings on architecture.

The first point is taken up in the text by Turnosky where he makes a brilliant exegesis of the Wittgenstein house and establishes some important connections between architecture, philosophy, aesthetics and poetics. But my point here is not a discussion of the Wittgenstein house or the way

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[2] Turnosky, Jan, (2009) *The Poetics of a Wall Projection*, p. 84

a certain logical philosophy can be translated into a house. For our purposes, it is enough to bear in mind the known conflict between the built reality and the abstract concept which is displayed in all the stories about the design and construction of that famous Vienna House. Common to all those stories is the existing conflict between Wittgenstein's design and the construction and it's materials, i.e., the concrete conditions of architecture; a conflict that demanded a continuous re-design. The most famous examples are the door handles and the corner radiators: unsatisfied with all the door-handles, heaters and all the ironmongery, he forced the contractor to find a factory that created special pieces for his house. What is remarkable is that this strain is a kind of extension from the strain played by Wittgenstein philosophy: namely, and to keep it simple, between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. I do not intend to establish any kind of illustration of his philosophical ideas and development, but to underline — following Turnovsky's argument — a certain "analogy of failure":

> It is entirely possible that the Tractatus and the Wittgenstein House share certain similarities, or 'structural' elements. What is noticeable for us, however, is the analogy of failure. More apparent and more meaningful than the resonance of certain passages of the Tractatus with the 'simple and static beauty of the house' is the process of escalating complication that plays out in the hands of the designer, or before the eyes of the beholder. A respect for empirical facts is a prerequisite for any meaningful confrontation with the problems of architecture. Such respect is characteristic of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.[3]

Besides all these important aspects — which would open a new line of reasoning, namely about the need for reconciliation in architecture between the practical and the aesthetical, interest and pure contemplation and to speak of a kind of useful poetics — Wittgenstein was able to make some important and striking contributions to the clarification of what is the heart of architecture.

In one of his fragments he liberates architecture from the burden of function:

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[3] Ibidem, pp. 35-36

> Architecture is a *gesture. Not every purposive [zweckmässige] movement*
> *of the human body is a gesture. Just as little as every functional building is*
> *architecture.*[4]

The main point is not that architecture is not dedicated to the fulfillment of a certain function, it is not the dismissal of any kind of purpose in building, but a kind of postulate that architecture is not defined by any function because (and here we can also hear Rossi's words) architecture can serve many purposes, many lives, many people, because — says Rossi — architecture has to do with the pursuit of happiness.

In Rossi's words, the usual function with which we are used to define architecture is replaced by its being a vehicle for life and its unforeseeable events:

> Architecture becomes the vehicle for an event we desire, whether or
> not it actually occurs [...] It is for this reason that the dimensions
> of a table or a house are very important — not, as the functionalists
> thought, because they carry out a determined function, but because
> they permit other functions. Finally, because they permit everything
> that is unforeseeable in life.[5]

And it is the unforeseeable that composes the expression of architecture. Of course, in any case, the architect must not forget that his gesture must also respond to a certain functional demand, but what I am stressing here is that the optimization of a function does not exhaust architecture. On the contrary:

> It is evident that every object has a function to which it must re-
> spond, but the object does not end at that point because functions
> vary over time. This has always been a rather scientific assertion of
> mine, and I have extracted it from the history of the city and of hu-
> man life: from the transformations of a palace, an amphitheater, a
> convent, a house, or of their various contexts.[6]

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[4] Wittgenstein, L., (1998), Culture and Value, MS126 15r: 28.10.1942

[5] Rossi, Aldo, (1984) A Scientific Autobiography, p. 3

[6] *ibidem*, pp. 74-75

Rossi speaks of this freedom from function and relates it with issues about typology and it's importance. In the sense when a building has the right geometry and clear typology it can serve many functions, many times, many people. What Rossi is thinking is that the stiffness of the geometrical design - the strong typology — is what allows a given building to be pertinent in several different contexts: to be able to stage several different plays, to use Rossy favorite metaphor for architecture.

Getting back to Wittgenstein identification of architecture with a gesture it is important to underline that in the comparison the philosopher makes what is remarkable is how he shows that architecture is not concentrated in itself, but is rather a response or, if one prefers, a reaction. But what architecture expresses is fundamentally a thought:

> Remember the impression made by good architecture, that it expresses a thought. One would like to respond to it too with a gesture.[7]

I will not develop here Wittgenstein's argument about gesture and the role it plays in aesthetic reactions. For my purposes, it is enough to state that a gesture is not a mechanic movement, without intention or purpose, but has a crucial part in the action of experiencing certain music, poems or paintings. It is as if a gesture is an external criterion for understanding something the subject experiences and understands but for which words are lacking [Rossi quoting Hölderlin will speak of his own architecture as *sprachloos*]. And so the gesture is not only a response but also a description of a certain impression, experience or, as Wittgenstein will add, thinking.

But the gesture does not express itself, rather it expresses a certain way of thinking, imagining and looking at things. And so architecture in its being a gesture is also this thinking, imagining and looking at things: a way of understanding one might say.

Wittgenstein writes:

> Work on philosophy — like work in architecture in many respects — is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how

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[7] "Erinnere Dich and den Eindruck guter Architektur, daß sie einen Gedanken ausdrückt. Man möchte auch ihr mit einer Geste folgen." Wittgenstein, op. cit., MS 156a 25r: ca. 1932-1934

one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)[8]

This proximity between philosophy and architecture is based on method-ological affinity (the need for a clear, unobstructed vision being its main foundation) and on the fact that both of them aim at reaching a feeling of well-being and harmony, what Wittgenstein calls a homecoming. This place is not so much the maternal womb of Freud and the Surrealists (timeless and imageless), but that place in which philosophy stops (to the philosopher philosophy stops when he/she "is no longer tormented by questions" and finds peace) and where architecture is so much a part of life that we stop noticing it. Finding home is not only the main desire of philosophical activity, but also of architecture: to find the place where we can honor the dead and the gods, celebrate the living and wait for the future. The radical possibility raised by Wittgenstein is that maybe this house we want to return to, where all questions will cease and we can be happy, is a place where we have never been and so we have to return to a place where we might have never been and thus we won't be able to recognize it. This way the return turns out to be a creation of one's own place in world: home. An idea of home closer to Rossi's own ideas of homeland:

> My country may be nothing more than a street or a window; and while it may be difficult to recover one's 'homeland' once it has been lost, the concept need not to contradict the notion of the citizen of the world.[9]

This possibility demands that we invent not only our future but also our past: our origin, the place we came from. For this reason, for Rossi architecture has to be "an architecture from the interior."[10]

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[8] "Die Arbeit an der Philosophie ist — wie vielfach die Arbeit in der Architektur — eigentlich mehr die Arbeit en Einem selbst. An der eignen Auffassung. Daran, wie man die Dinge sieht. (Und was man von ihnen verlangt.)" Wittgenstein, op. cit., MS 112 46: 14.10.1931

[9] Rossi, A., op. cit., p. 55

[10] Rossi, A., p. 26

4. The Need for Ambiguity

> I wish only to emphasize how a building, how architecture may be a
> primary element onto which life is grafted.[11]

All I have been doing so far is showing that the primary aspect of architecture is its being a place where life can happen. And life in its multiple variations is not compatible with a straight and strict architectonic order, and for this reason ambiguity and incompleteness are necessary in order to respond to life's manifold manifestations. Rossi sees this ambiguity and incompleteness in theater. His frequent use of theater as a metaphor for the ambitions of his projects and for all architecture to come is related with the fact that a theater is only a frame, a kind of silent presence that gives a solid structure to different situations; it is there but keeps vanishing and never appears as an autonomous object: it is only a platform for events to take place on.

> The theater is inseparable from its stage sets, its models, the ex
> perience of every combination; and the stage is reduced to the ar
> tisan's or scientist's work-table. It is experimental as science is ex
> perimental, but it casts its peculiar spell on every experiment. Inside
> the theater nothing can be accidental, yet nothing can be perman
> ently resolved either.[12]

The question (a version of which I have identified in the beginning as the primal conflict of architecture) is that even though architecture has to contain life and its unpredictable events, this unpredictability is not a way to dismiss the need for rigor and the awareness that buildings are not accidental, but solid structures that resist time.

   My purpose here is not to state a definition of architecture as being mainly and essentially performatic, but to underline that the form produced by architects is defined not by a *a priori* function, condition or order, but by its use [to continue the approaches to Wittgenstein philosophy, it is interesting to think of the role that 'use' has in the definition of a word]. This use-value does not mean the contingency of any given built form, but

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[11] Rossi, A., op. cit., p. 20
[12] Rossi, A., op. cit, p. 33

draws attention to the fact that architecture is constantly being defined and gaining new orders, new uses, new lives. A permanent metamorphosis of architecture that in contemporary practice has gained the name of re-use. This practice is directed to the fact that it is not the initial function according to which a certain building has been built that defines it and that gives it a certain quality, but rather the ability of being permanently converted into several different functions, resisting time and a multitude of uses and people. The need to accommodate new uses, new forms of life, new functions, requires architecture to be forgotten just as in a theater one forgets the stage and what comes to attention is the life performed in a given frame: it is as if this frame-space was a kind of condition of possibility for life itself. For this reason forgetfulness and silence are so important for architecture to carry out its destiny.

> The architect must prepare his instruments with the modesty of a technician; they are the instruments of an action which we can only glimpse, or imagine, although he knows that the instrument itself can evoke and suggest the action. I particularly love empty theaters with fez lights lit and, most of all, those partial rehearsals where the voices repeat the same bar, interrupt it, resume it.[13]

And architecture needs to be uncertain and ambiguous because life is also uncertain and ambiguous. An ambiguity one can see when a building appears open to be completed by people, their desires, a space where life and death can happen. All the happenings to-come that will take place in this theater are allowed by architecture, but they are not anticipated by the architect. New possibilities are always unexpectedly added, they are unimaginable possible uses of constructed sites that could not have been anticipated by the designed project.

5. Forgetability, Silence and Muteness

> I have translated the last lines of a Hölderlin poem into my own architecture: "The walls stand mute and cold, in the wind the banners

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[13] Rossi, Aldo, p. 20

creak". I concluded one of my lectures at Zurich with this quota-
tion, which I apply to all my projects: My architecture stands cold
and mute.[14]

This depiction of Rossi's architecture must not be confused with any kind
of severity or aesthetical austerity, but his architecture is cold and mute
because it is not the buildings that have the fire and the words but the
people who inhabit them. It is always the dwelling that gives architecture
its expression and its words: it's warmth and fire. Being cold and mute is
another way of saying the need to forget architecture:

> In order to be significant, architecture must be forgotten, or must
> present only an image for reverence which subsequently becomes
> confounded with memories.[15]

> Forgetting Architecture comes to mind as a more appropriate title
> for this book, since while I may talk about a school, a cemetery, a
> theater, it is more correct to say I talk about life, death, imagina-
> tion.[16]

The need to forget architecture comes not only because the sites built by
architecture should allow the unexpected, but also because architecture is
not about itself. Rather it is concerned with life just as it is lived by real
people in real lives [and it is in this sense that the ethical commitment of
architecture is strongly present]. In this we can detect a strong criticism
by Rossi against the modern discourse on the autonomy of architecture
and its focus on its own conditions, its own processes. For Rossi — as
for Wittgenstein — architecture — and we should add philosophy — is an
activity turned towards the exterior, the outside, to the imperfections of
constructions, their cracks, ruins, and failures.

At this point, it is worth making an important remark. I am not propo-
sing that architecture should only be receptive to life, site, construction
conditions, etc. It is true that architecture, just as philosophy, is an effort
of clear vision, an effort to see things clearly and to dismiss all possible

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[14] Rossi, A., op. cit., p. 44
[15] Rossi, A., op. cit., p. 45
[16] Rossi, A., op. cit., p. 78

confusions and discomforts. It is useful to remember Wittgenstein's image of the philosopher as the one who looks for the place where the shoe tightens and when he finds it the discomfort goes away:

> One of the most difficult of the philosopher's tasks is to find out where the shoe pinches.[17]

Rossi does not speak of uncomfortable places, but of happiness and love. And for life to be happy it must have a structure inside which to happen: a theater performance can only happen inside the frame of a stage. The stage can have many and unimaginable forms, but in order to bring a certain action to life the actor always needs a certain frame. Ant it is to building this structure of allowance of action and events that architecture is committed too.

The architectonic aspects I have been discussing do not constitute an architectural program in the strict sense of the projection of a space, nor do they try to establish a manifesto for future architecture. Rather, they are paths for the development of an understanding of a certain kind of architectonic experience which is centered not on the invention of form, function, materials or construction systems but on the discipline's relations to people, nature and memory. This commitment forces not only each architectural proposal to spring from a strong attention to the outside world and to the rites of people [remember that for Rossi architecture is a rite and for Wittgenstein man is a ritual animal], but also reveals that its commitment is to the grafting of life and to putting things in their right place and giving things a certain order: that is why typologies are so important.

In this sense, the architectonic experience here at stake exceeds in a kantian sense all that is given, all logic and function, and it reveals itself, to use Peter Zumthor words, as an atmosphere. A concept that does not set something exterior to architecture itself, but indicates what an architectonic quality is. Atmosphere is not an element one can simply add to a given building, but the condition of life itself:

> Put someone in the wrong atmosphere [Atmosphäre] & nothing will function as it should. He will seem unhealthy in every part. Bring

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[17] Wittgenstein, L., (1984), Notebooks 1914-1916, 15.6.1915

him back into his right element [das richtige Element], & everything
will blossom and look healthy.[18]

I will not dwell here on the importance of Peter Zumthor's insights on
architecture but he really is a permanent presence in all of my discussion.
Just two brief notes: he states that when doing architecture one must go
back to the times when one lived architecture without noticing it and with
this he is stating the need to forget architecture in order to be able to make
architecture. And what one must forget is the technical, the ready-made
solution, the idea of Style. Modernism and its international style, propos-
ing identical building design and site solutions anywhere in the world [one
single example: Courbusier *Unité d'Habitation* that has the same measures,
volumes, forms and materials in Marseille, Berlin or Chandigar in India], is
here under a strong attack. Finally, the way Zumthor identifies architec-
ture as a commitment in creating atmospheres, as the need for architec-
tural thinking to deal with elements such as light, sound, sensuality, etc.
architecture is not about exquisite design, expressive forms, pure innova-
tion, but it is a way of allowing life to happen, and for this it must remain
attentive to the world, to imagination, life and death. Finding the place
where life can work without any kind of restraints is the big architectonic
utopia.

6. Poetics of Architecture

In a very brief, but accurate remark, Turnosky states:

> True poetics is always both poetic and non-poetic, i.e. practical, this
> kind of fundamental ambiguity is actually more compatible with ar-
> chitecture, where it is supported by the heterogeneity of compon-
> ents and functions, than it is with literature, where it is only con-
> ceivable in opposition to the implicit monofunctionality of the text.
> [...] An architectural poetics based on these two forms of ambival-
> ence reveals two mutually reinforcing conditions: 1) the fundamental
> poetics that emerge from continual oscillations between pragmatic
> and aesthetic functions, which can tip even the most straightforward

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[18] Wittgenstein, L., (1998) Vermischte Bemerkungen, MS 125 58v: 18.5.1942

object into a state of ambiguity; 2) the poetics of fundamentals that emerge from the immutable principle of syntax, which turns architecture into a quagmire of formal / aesthetic intentions[19]

These words go straight to the main argument I have been trying to get to. Namely that the poetic meaning and content of architecture is achieved when one forgets architecture. That is: one must forget the program that gave birth to a certain project, all the social, political and economical constraints, all the functions a building was primarily designed to fulfill, and concentrate instead on the way buildings perform a continuous oscillation between function, pragmatism, successful performativity [all the interests that in a strict Kantian sense would negate all aesthetical experience] and all those things that exceed the original purpose, the original plan and destination. And what exceeds architecture are smells, sounds, the warmth of a wall, the shades, the feeling of a door handle, the variety of movements people perform, and so on: all those things that Zumthor would call it's atmosphere. But these same elements that exceed architecture are what make us forget the walls, the typology, the structure, and draw our attention to the life happening in it.

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[19] Turnovsky, op. cit., pp. 84-85

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