

A MOMENT BEFORE THE LAST EXPLOSION

The Future of Architecture

PUBLISHED IN

Diario 16, Madrid, 16-10-1993

Oeste 13, Cáceres, 1995

a Arquitectura 15, Méjico, 1995

KA 134, Seoul, 1995

Domus 776, Milan, 1995

Circo 30, Madrid, 1996

La Idea Construida, 1996

The Built Idea, Ed. Oscar Riera Ojeda, Philadelphia, 2012

The Future of Architecture is in Ideas

A moment after the last explosion more than half of all human beings will be dead, and the dust and the smoke of the continents in flames will vanquish the sun's light, and absolute darkness will reign the world again; a winter of orange rains and frozen hurricanes will switch the oceans' time and turn back the rivers' course, whose fish will have died of thirst in the burning waters and whose birds will not find the sky; perpetual snow will cover the Saharan desert and the view of the Amazon will disappear from the face of the earth, destroyed by hail, as the era of rock and heart transplants returns to its glacial infancy; the few human beings that survive the first shock, and those that had had the privilege of a safe refuge at three in the afternoon on that sad Monday of the greatest catastrophe, only to have saved their lives to die from their memories. CREATION WILL HAVE ENDED.

So tremendously begins Garcia Marquez's El Cataclismo de Damocles, a very beautiful and tenderly demanding text which is always worthwhile to reread, and each time moves one deeply.

Thus, a moment before this last explosion, and at the same moment as the explosion, an artist will be creating, an architect will enthusiastically be building his best work, his masterpiece, with all of his soul, trying to complete Creation.

When one questions about the Future of Architecture, one can give only one answer, and it can not be any other, that the future is in Ideas. That it is in the thoughts and the hands of the architects capable of generating these ideas and of materializing, raising, building them.

The Cataclysm, the big explosion, could destroy the earth, and with it the Forms built by man, and perhaps man himself. Yet it could never, never, destroy IDEAS, for ideas are indestructible.

The History of Architecture, and the Future is History, is more than a history of forms, styles, it is a History of Ideas which are translated into these known forms. And to inquire about the Future of Architecture will be a task of investigating the ideas which make possible this future and the men capable of realizing it.

LIGHT AND GRAVITY:
THE QUID OF THE QUESTION

It is man who creates Architecture for man. Through time man and space are related, materially translated in Light and Gravity. GRAVITY builds space and LIGHT builds time. Both the control of gravity and the dialogue with light are questions central to Architecture. The future of Architecture depends on the possibility of a new comprehension of these two phenomenon, or better than new, a clearer and deeper understanding.

The revolution which the new materials, glass and steel, have stimulated in these past years, has been a revolution relative to a different comprehension and resolution of the themes of light and gravity. Both topics are fortunately inevitable in Architecture.

The fight against Gravity, to tame it and at the same time Space, will continue being the central theme of Architecture. Fortunately this battle is ineludible and consists entirely of maintaining its control, perhaps with new techniques. If steel and reinforced concrete have made possible contemporary architecture, we can believe, although it may be difficult, that newer technologies may appear. The question will be, simply, to control this "G" which as children we studied in Physics. This "G" is as real as the earth itself, to which all matter tends to return, and always does.

The dialogue with light will be the other main theme. When the control of light has been the *raison d'être* of the History of Architecture, only now, that we have greater means to control it, it seems that the majority of architects have forgotten it. The industrialized production of plate glass in large dimensions along with steel, makes possible that old utopia of vertical light. And also makes possible the creation of horizontal spaces in continuity with horizontal light. The Future of Architecture will improve when architects think more rigorously and act in consequence.

One then discovers a precise and precious coincidence, that light is the only truth capable of conquering and convincing gravity. And thus when the architect employs traps for the sun, for the light, which pierces the space formed by the structures, either heavier or lighter, that need to be connected to the ground in order to transmit the primitive force of gravity, thus breaking the spell, and allowing the space to float, to levitate, to fly. Hagia Sofia, the Pantheon, or Ronchamp are palpable examples of this portentous reality.

MAN AND ATTAINING BEAUTY

How can we translate this relationship, this taming of gravity and light by man? The conclusion of this relationship is to attain Beauty, the "Pulchrum." If truth, the "Verum," makes intellect yield, as goodness, the "Bonum," does will, in the realm of sentiment man yields to Beauty.

Zubiri, a twentieth-century Spanish philosopher, explains this with absolute clarity in his last writings that in their precise reference to matter, to materials, seem to speak about Architecture.

The Future of Architecture can not be any other than what it has been, is, or will be: the creation of eternal Beauty whose most concrete and convincing expression is perhaps Architecture. This desire for Beauty does not imply only one possible Architecture. Beauty in its multiple facets can be molded in Architecture in many different ways, in very different forms, through diverse styles. Le Corbusier and Gaudi were contemporaries, working on their respective masterpieces at the same time: which is the more beautiful, the Villa Savoye or the Church of the Holy Family?

To serve the needs of man (Function), to adequately respond to the surrounding landscape (Context), to build rationally (Construction), and accessible to all (Economy) etc., should be qualities of Architectural creation. Given the anterior, and freely added, like a gift, Architecture must offer man a mysterious but real "something more," Beauty. Intelligent Beauty is the consequence of buildings which are built ideas, something more, much more than mere construction.

To manifest to man the unknown facets of this Beauty through the taming of gravity and light, will be the central question for the future of Architecture.

ARCHITECTURE AND RICE: TIME AND ARCHITECTURE

Architecture needs a precise amount of time to be well made; a time and a *tempo*, a length and a rhythm.

Rice made in five minutes always turns out a little hard, and rice that is on the stove more than half an hour turns out too soft. The cooking time for rice is twenty minutes, no more nor less, and over a low flame after having first reached a boil. If not it will be ruined, here as in China, at present and in the Future.

Architecture, with more serious and profound reasons than rice, also needs its time and its *tempo*. Time to study and analyze, to understand well the

data of the problem. Time to reflect, to arrive at a synthesis, a rigorous solution, and an adequate amount of time for its construction.

Yet, despite this being so evident, humanity has never fabricated so many and such large stupidities, so well and so solidly built. The haste of necessity, with its vain logic, results in so many useless buildings. Overcooked in the haste of their conception as if they were *doughnuts*. Built in a snap, everything goes. It is the disposable architecture of the *Kleenex*. These are the buildings which surround us, designed by salesmen, who with degrees in Architecture received from who-knows-where and who-knows-how, cheapen Architecture. For them it does not matter, and they respond to a society to which it also does not matter, a society who in its ignorance hates Architecture. Our society, whose spiritual nourishment is *soap operas* and whose material nourishment is *fast food*. They do not know what a good rice is, so rich and so economical. Neither do they know what poetry is, so much with so few words, nor what is Architecture, so simple; its so, so simple.

WATER CAST INTO PUDDLES FORM: WHY AND FOR WHAT

As the poet so firmly expresses: "These forms say nothing, water cast into puddles." Just as the words in poetry, in the eternal debate about form and content, the forms of architecture should translate ideas. And express them firmly, with the force that only architecture has.

Thus we are surrounded, inundated in useless forms, a flood of what is called "design." From the plans overflowing with "design" shifts, cranks, rotations, waves, slashes, snot, etc..., emerge in plan as in section as in elevation.

And later the built reality, as if it were a bazaar; handrails, doorknobs, banisters, counters, door jambs, etc...; what can one say?

The overabundance of elements, this overwhelming array of ornament, tries to distract us with a great deal of special effects from the emptiness of its intentions. Not even that. It is water cast into puddles.

If all of this excess design, ornament in the Loosian sense of the term, is only in reference to the superfluous, it is even worse when this occurs employing Technology.

Architecture progresses supported by advances in Technology. Without steel or plate glass the continuity of space would never have been possible, neither would the control of vertical light.

And these marvels of Architecture, these Copernican shifts, are only possible when Technology is the basis for illuminating new ideas: when Technology serves as the “how,” and does not try to be the “what.” When Technology bypasses Architecture and is established as the protagonist, it is only form. More sculpture than Architecture it is a beautiful and interesting skeleton, yet just bones and not a “living being.” These are the new “machinisms” and “deconstructivisms” and “fracturings,” supported by solder and silicon, and adorned with bright and photogenic plastic colors. And later with a ventriloquist’s voice they are hung with sharp theories: “repetition,” “poli-rhythm” of materials, “fractures” never seen, or the already exhausted “deconstruction.” And the architects move happily through history hand-in-hand with Derrida or Deleuze like boy scouts through the mountains.

Clearly these infractions by design, these outbursts of technology and furious attacks by lent voices, are no more than the useless defense of the useless. They are mirrors to which the vain and narcissists look constantly in order to forget that they are incapable of moving on. They remain before the mirror instead of moving through it, like Alice, or breaking it, like the stepmother of Snow-white.

Passing through it one enters, as did Alice, the land of dreams; wonderland, the wonder of Architecture. Breaking the mirror, they would learn, like Snow-white’s stepmother, from the thousands of shards repeating thousands of times: “its not you, its Snow-white.” They would learn that Hadrian, Bernini, and Le Corbusier continue being architects today and for the future, that their ideas and their buildings were ahead of their time, are beyond time, and are timeless.

We have seen the themes central to the Future of Architecture: Man, Beauty, Light, and Gravity. And we have also seen some of the demonstrable errors of our runaway century: the lack of Time, the excess of Design, and the inadequate use of Technology. We thus need to consider who will be the people, the architects, capable of facing the Future of Architecture.

SOCIETY’S CRASS IGNORANCE: SOCIETY AND THE ARTIST

In olden days, it was the ruling class, the patrons, who commissioned works of art. They demanded that Architecture, with a capital “A,” be in their service and for their delight, as a patent sign of their power. But logically and luckily,

with the passage of the centuries, these works have become the inheritance of all of Humanity, at the service of all.

In contrast, as if against time, today, when Society is unanimously democratic and the State representative of all, the opposite is true. Aside from some limited exceptions, when those who commission works of art as well as, and especially, Architecture, select the artist or the architect, they never, almost never, select the best. Its almost always the worst.

And so are our cities, dissolved. They are like museums of all imaginable horrors and whims. And why is there always such a rush to build these damn monsters? Could it be that if someone warned this ignorant and materialistic Society that they would not be permitted to continue with their infamous outrages? In the face of this, what can one say about the Future of Architecture?

I would like to be optimistic and remember that in this Society there exist architects, consecrated masters, and angry youth, who are willing, if they are allowed and are given time, to right the wrong.

THE DESIRABLE HAPPY ENDING

Finally the Future of Architecture is in ideas. It is in the architects that think, in those that have ideas and are capable of building them, and dedicate the necessary Time. Those that are capable of taming Gravity and controlling Light, and always placing Man at the center. To search for Beauty and give it to man, and make a Society able to enjoy Culture and permit the simple wonder that is Architecture.

García Marquez states, and how well he does, that the cost of just one nuclear warhead would serve, if only for one autumnal Sunday, to perfume with sandalwood Niagara Falls. Thus this same amount, and even much less, would serve, for all the Sundays of all the autumns, to perfume the Architecture of the entire world. And all of the springs, winters, and summers. For the true Architecture, the built idea, is forever, making real the lasting desire to last, with the aroma of eternity.