

**THE LIGHT THAT BUILDS TIME AND SPACE**

**The eternal ephemeral architectures of Adolphe Appia**

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It sounds in the air the perfect voice of Callas: "Ho visto il figlio sul materno seu", interpreting Kundry in the recording of a sublime Parsifal that the soprano interpreted at the beginning of her career in the 50's. It could not be a more appropriate background to write about Adolphe Appia, who at the age of twenty is moved by the representation of Parsifal that he sees precisely in Bayreuth and for which he later draws some precious charcoals.

It might be daring for an architect to write about a scenographer, but Le Corbusier already said that Architecture is "the magnificent play of volumes under light". And what is it if not that which Appia stubbornly and with a clear mind proposed throughout his life? Stripped architectures, essential spaces animated by light: spaces out of time.

So essential, so stripped down, so almost nothing that they seem like ruins. As Professor Martínez Roger rightly points out when describing Appia's strategies:

It is heading towards an increasingly severe simplification and stylization, a path towards abstraction, where the form will take precedence over the object. These increasingly austere spaces base their creed on the architectural foundation of the primitive cultures that shape the knowledge of the West, from ancient Mesopotamia to Pompeii. From the Ziggurat to the Roman road. And all of it suggested, all of it timeless.

In these terms I sometimes try to transmit to my students how the Architecture that I call essential is in these keys. When Architecture is stripped, stripped of everything that is accessory, temporary, it is left with nothing in front of the light, revealing its full spatial beauty. What the architect Melnikov, author of the Russian Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of 1925, expressed so well at the end of his life:

Having become my own boss, I convinced Architecture to shed her marble robes, wash off her makeup and reveal herself as herself, naked as a goddess, graceful and young. And to stop being complacent and pleasant, as befits true Beauty.

And from the point of view of architecture, Appia's platforms and volumes evoke some of Mies van der Rohe's proposals. There is a well-known image of Mies at the end of his life sitting calmly on the steps of Epidauros that seem to have been raised by Appia.

After a conversation with Martínez Roger we agreed that it was possible that the two masters had met, so close were they. Mies was born in 1886, twenty-four years later than Appia. And we thought it was possible that the first edition, in German, of *La música y la puesta en escena* was in Mies' select library, since this book by Appia appeared on March 30, 1899 in Munich, published by Hugo Bruckman. Without having reliable data to support such a possibility, it is surprising to see so many coincidences in some of Mies' works. The same year 1928 in which Adolphe Appia died, Mies van der Rohe built two

basic works for the history of architecture in which the theme of the podium is the protagonist: the Barcelona Pavilion and the Tugendhat House in Brno.

The establishment of a base is a good way of approaching architecture: it places man on high, on the plane resulting from the consolidation of the ground through the podium. Or in Semper's words, building the stereotomic part of Architecture. The ideas of Semper, the architect who built the Bayreuth theater for Richard Wagner, so closely linked by so many circumstances to Appia, are taken up. It would not be strange either if *The Four Elements of Architecture* [Die vier Elemente der Baukunst], published by Semper in 1851, had at some point fallen into the hands of our set designer.

I remember well how in 1993, when I proposed an emphatic solution for the Copenhagen Philharmonic competition, some architects pointed out to me that it was "pure Appia". I must admit that my first knowledge of the Swiss set designer came in 1994, through the book by Jörg Zutter published by Payot in Lausanne, in French, which was given to me by the same architect who made that remark, Rik Nys. Seen now it is evident, and it could seem that some drawing of Appia as the "Espace rythmique. La ruelle" of 1909-1910 was a perspective of my project for the Danish philharmonic, so close was his world to that great podium dug into the water's edge.

Of course, some key projects of modern architecture are or have a lot of Appia in them. Jörn Utzon's Sydney Opera House, the Danish master's best-known work, contains, beneath its winged roofs, a beautiful stepped plinth operation descending to the sea that would have delighted Appia.

Or the brilliant Malaparte House in Capri that Adalberto Libera erected with Curzio Malaparte in 1938, ten years after Appia's death. A dock of dreams opened on the Tyrrhenian Sea. The same Capri where Appia was in 1900.

Or all the works of Adolf Loos (1870-1933), whom Appia should also have known. For he not only coincided with the Viennese architect in time but also in the way of understanding space. I have before me an image of the Möller house, from 1928, that anyone would say is by Appia himself. This is summarized very well by Benedetto Gravagnuolo in his definitive book on Loos, where he highlights in his architecture "the desire for silence and the gradual elimination of mediation between language and things, to return to a sort of 'first name' in which mute things speak". So applicable to Appia.

All the examples and masters of Architecture brought up here and many more only corroborate this strong architectural aroma of Appia that Martin Dreier, the theater historian, has expressed so well when he writes:

The platform is architecture or architectural landscape. To the laws of music, structuring time and duration, corresponds a "plantation", a "topology": for the performer, a thousand new possibilities of spatio-temporal unfolding. This scenography must represent an imagined reality, precisely an idea, limited to the essential: enough of the slavish imitation of nature.

What is deduced over and over again when one dives into Appia's many drawings that are pure exercises in Architecture.

How can we talk about Appia without talking about the question he considered central? I have written actively and passively that light is, with gravity, the central matter of Architecture. Gravity that constructs space and light that constructs time. Appia in his theories assigns time to music and space to light. It is not in vain that he builds stages. The same thing we architects do. Appia tells us that the soul of modern theater is light.

There are two correlative drawings by Appia from 1909 that, being particularly simple, I find fascinating. They are entitled Espace Rythmique, the first Avant qu'une main invisible ouvre la porte [Before an invisible hand opens the door] and La porte ouverte [The open door] the second. I offer you the following boutade. Imagine that the patch of light that passes through the open door and materializes on the floor, was moving in the course of the performance with the same rhythm as the sun moves every day, light in motion. What would Appia say if he saw it? And it is that light in movement, with the music, as he wanted, also constructs time.