

Architecture and Consumption: Research Perspectives

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Abstract

After the defence of the author's PhD dissertation *Devoid of Any Style. Problems and Perspectives of Architecture in the Age of Post-Consumption* at the end of 2018, the conclusions of the work lay the foundations for the subsequent detection of a personal research line. The dissertation has analysed orientations of architectural research and practice in relation to the current change in consumption patterns, affected by many factors in the exceptional complexity of the contemporary age: the environmental conditions of Anthropocene, the digitalization of services, the pervasiveness of information, the economic recession and the consequent unlocking of new fields, different markets and choice opportunities. Analysed case studies related to the rising paradigm of Circular Economy, together with the contemporary public debate around design showcased in five architectural exhibitions from the last decade compose a complex but significant map of current orientations in architecture, which suggest four main research directions to investigate further the relationship between architecture and consumption.

Keywords: architecture, consumption, waste, domesticity, design practice

After the defence of a PhD dissertation, the conclusions of the work may lay the foundations to orient further research directions. The author's PhD thesis *Devoid of Any Style. Problems and Perspectives of Architecture in the Age of Post-Consumption* has been defended cum laude in December 2018. Its conclusions are today undergoing a further analysis to define subsequent research lines.

1. Problems and Perspectives of Architecture in the Age of Post-Consumption

Devoid of Any Style. Problems and Perspectives of Architecture in the Age of Post-Consumption had the ambition to detect current intervention directions

of architecture in the exceptional complexity of contemporary age, characterized by the environmental conditions of Anthropocene, the digitalization of services, the pervasiveness of the information, the economic recession. Therefore, the research has chosen to tackle this complexity through the investigation of current consumption patterns, affected and profoundly changed by the illustrated conditions and by the access to new fields, new markets, new choice opportunities. The investigation has focused on the evolution of consumption styles in the last decade, from the disruptive explosion of the economic crisis of 2007/08 which has reset established frameworks and produced new fields to explore: the under-construction fields of post-consumption. The focus has been on

consumption for its relation to resource use and the connected social and cultural attitude, and for its pervasiveness in the mass society; moreover, consumption is inherent in human nature, basis for the survival and primary source of pleasure and fulfillment since the first moments of life. To observe how consumption conditions are changing means observing a moment of profound modification of the values and purposes according to which the Earth is inhabited. The research was aimed to respond to this question: which are the intervention directions in architecture research and practice in the current condition of changing consumption? To do so, waste has been employed in the research as a sign of complexities and contradictions detected in current consumption modalities. Therefore, the research was focused on the scarcity of natural resources, consequence and antithesis of waste. Waste was thus investigated for its physical value and, above all, for its cultural value: in this sense, it is analyzed on a global level. Otherwise, according to spatial and design considerations, in order to reduce the scale and the complexity of the field involved by a question so ambitious and, moreover, due to the character of the question – more focused on the definition of a pervasive background rather than the understanding of dynamics in a defined context – the research has chosen to focus on the reference context traced by cultural production connected to the topic, stretching geographically in the global village and broadly coinciding with European context, where similar political and economic conditions exist, with several incursions in the US background.

In its four parts, the dissertation has reconstructed the path towards the awareness of the limits of Earth's

ecosystem and its resources, from the literature and the design experimentations of the '60s around the idea of systemic thinking to contemporary age, where theories about degrowth and the rise of independent consumption paths push the focus of architectural debate far from iconic architecture towards a design moved by different drivers. The paradigm of Circular Economy (CE) – analysed in the specific context of the Netherlands – has been taken as case study to deduce contradictions, criticalities and potentialities of new economies and new consumption models and investigate their outputs when applied to architecture and design domains. The understanding of the interactions between new consumption models and design was examined further through the study of five architectural exhibitions from the last decade, contemporary places of cultural production which have chosen to dialogue with the changing conditions described in the work. The analysis of the production showcased within these exhibitions, together with contributions from the public debate around design have composed a complex but significant map of current orientations in architecture.

1.1. Preliminary Conclusions

The research has investigated the relation existing between consumption and space starting from the analysis of the waste removal chain in the urban domain. The chain of waste removal begins in the household, affected in its modalities by specific lifestyles and forms of consumption, and continues in the urban space towards the relocation in disposal facilities, often with a problematic relation with the urban environment. This digression has clarified how consumption patterns

have a powerful strength in shaping living spaces, from the domestic environment to the public space.

Furthermore, the research has unveiled several implications that Circular Economy paradigm and similar production/consumption models have on architecture: they still present many investigation opportunities, which would develop at best in the framework of a research by design. After the analysis of related case studies, a difficult relation emerges between this paradigm and many angles of the discipline: the theoretical application of CE to architecture opens interesting perspectives in terms of space uses but envisages a restraining scenario in methodological terms. The potentialities opened by the conception of buildings as parts of interconnected cycles are innovative and promising, but the innovation character looks unidirectional. After a first, adaptive phase, once the circular novelty would be consumed, there will be still space for other innovations? On the long run, the CE paradigm theoretically contemplates all the components, element and material composing architecture as part of a cycle, constantly rotating around itself, with few spaces for other visions. Again: making systems interconnected is risky. Bugs and failures could propagate, short-circuiting nested systems. Furthermore, a circular paradigm scientifically applied to architecture pictures an over-controlling and over-predicting design, with no space for errors, hybridization, impetus. Several fundamental masterpieces come from detours from an original plan; many of them are today part of the common heritage after being neglected and left behind in the past, when there was no infrastructure nor interest to "reabsorb" them in a cycle. The scarcity of resources is a reason not good

enough to deprive next generations of their potential cultural heritage.

Other considerations deal with the growing ephemeralization of the architectural practice: the research has analysed the production of many practitioners, not working with built space but interested in defining space uses and management systems, suggesting a practice less focused on the design of objects and committed to the enabling of the processes preceding and following the building of the objects. Within this background, there is still space for the materialization: design discipline can act more and more in combination, in a synergic action with other realms to elaborate systemic answers to multifaceted questions. Architecture is a part - often central - of multidisciplinary plans, involving various expertise and angles, aimed to the triggering of complex dynamics of supralocal interest. This perspective proposes an answer to the quest for new paradigms that has identified the architectural debate in the last decade: the new paradigm seems right to be the absence of a unique paradigm, in favor of a discipline able to take different forms and perform multifaceted approaches to different and multiple conditions.

2. Architecture and Consumption: Research Perspectives

The conclusions of the PhD research illustrated in the last paragraphs open different lines of research, deepening several definitions of the relationship between architecture and consumption.

2.1. Domesticity and Consumption

The relationship between spatial organization of domestic landscape and

consumption is determined by the lifestyle of people and by the goods people consume and bring in their houses. Throughout last two centuries, from the rise of the packaged food in the 1880s through the post-war consumerism wave, this relation has been in constant redefinition, and has been recently disruptively affected by the pervasive digitalization of life. The combined, interrelated and systemic action performed by digital revolution, Anthropocene conditions and global recession has enabled innovative fields of action, exchange opportunities and business formulas: Sharing Economy (SE) gathers many of these options, working by "exploiting inefficiencies and redundancies" (FAR Architects, 2016), making a better use of goods, preserving resources and letting commodities and appliances exchange possible. Evolved consumption patterns implied by SE question material sides of contemporary lifestyles: sharing physical assets – for social, economic or convenience reasons – implies maximizing and optimizing their use, lowering, deferring or erasing the need to own specific items exclusively. This system has enabled many services to develop and establish as global drivers of change: innovations as Airbnb, Peerby, car sharing services, couch surfing, online platform to share files are employed to build individual consumption paths outside the limits of a mainstream that looks more and more rigid and outdated. Sharing physical assets means not rely on them all the time: SE thus deeply influences the relationship with objects. Radicalizing sharing economy, it is possible to envisage a condition of total reduction, driving design towards essentiality, radical minimalism, to minimal forms of living: a lifestyle characterized by sobriety, frugality, lightness, valuing few, essential physical assets. However,

assets conceived to be 'essential' or 'basic' heavily depend on the geographical, cultural and socio-economic context: identity is largely derived from the objects and physical assets possessed, not to mention those items helping people affirming a status, which in several contexts constitutes a basic need. To limit the reflection to the Western domestic landscape, households are often set around specific physical assets and legitimized by them: the television, the good china exposed in the cabinet, the bookshelf, the flowers on a coffee table. "That's all your house is – a place for your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it" (Carlin, 1981). Radical virtualization could then open wide perspectives in terms of new conceptions of household. The British Pavilion at XV Venice Architecture Biennale showcased in the exhibition *Home Economics. Five new models for domestic life* an ensemble of researches around living spaces "challenging financial models, categories of ownership, forms of life, social and gender power relations" (Bose, Self and Williams, 2016). Domestic space is redefined according to the status quo, less focused on the possession of items and more oriented to the time spent in a domestic environment, to understand the power of use to shape and define space. The exhibition was divided into five sections, related to different occupation span of times: *Hours, Days, Months, Years and Decades*. The proposal for the *Hours* section, *Own nothing, share everything* – developed by the pavilion's curators Jack Self, Finn Williams and Shumi Bose – investigates "whether sharing can be a form of luxury rather than a compromise" (Bose, Self and Williams, 2016). The concept envisions a communal living room to

share with several apartments on the same floor of a theoretical building: a space to entertain friends, socialize, work or relax. The living room is equipped with modular daybeds, allowing to tailor the space for different needs: rather than sofa, bed is the most used piece of furniture in British homes, "a place for production and reproduction, working and relaxing, socializing and sleeping" (Bose, Self and Williams, 2016). Large transparent communal wardrobes store common objects infrequently used – as power tools – or objects better afforded together, like certain types of clothes. The proposal stresses how combined resources give access to a result that is more than the sum of the parts in terms of access to goods, exchange opportunities and better environment impact.

The private household, in its many forms and arrangements, is today the place where people can self-determine in terms of consumption and lifestyles choices and prolong their public attitude and critical position; in these conditions, contemporary architectural design fosters the redefinition of the private environment in relation to a more and more collective world.

2.2. Architecture of Consumption

The relationship between architecture and consumption materializes in the facilities where the output of the consumption is managed and processed. Waste treatment plants realized in the last two decades have been switching – thanks to the growing involvement of architectural practices in their designing – from ostracized technological infrastructures to complex architectures. Traditionally associated with dirt, pollution, noise,

smell, unpleasantness, depreciation, danger, these facilities are subject the most to Nimby syndrome. This attitude is licit in the light of average conditions of waste management facilities: they are inaccessible spaces, out of scale in comparison to the proportion of inhabited areas of the urban environment. Their dimensioning is studied to work with big amounts of matter, not matching human scale; their industrial, mechanical nature spreads a message of imperviousness and danger. The measures adopted to minimize the nuisance to public life contribute to make them warding off: big surfaces hiding manufacturing areas, chimneys to distance smokes and smells from the ground level, entrance forbidden, nocturnal functioning. These facilities are perceived as murky and detrimental and are wrapped up in the oblivion, when not repulsion, causing issues of integration in the urban fabric. In the architectural culture, many voices are raising advocating for a reconsideration of the role of these facilities. Facing the upcoming densification of cities, these plants are called to measure with urban, inhabited fabric to build interchange fulcrums between private and public. Furthermore, they represent an experimentation ground for a rich, almost unexplored range of functional and architectural themes.

In the last two decades, the involvement of design practices in the project and realization of waste architectures and infrastructures has grown at moderate but significant pace; today, these examples build a relevant ensemble to analyze, to deduce recurring approaches and features. These complexes decisively propose themselves as polarities in the urban regions, entering a dialectic relationship with other public facilities as stations, concert halls, sport centers. Their program overcomes their original

one. They integrate public spaces and common functions, often related to leisure and tourism: visitor centers, museum paths and exhibitions, educational centers. They overtly take on the role of punctual infrastructure, inserting carefully in the built environment and offering quality services to the community. Their architecture is conceived to make urban metabolism and waste familiar to the public, raising awareness around consumption and resource use; they integrate public spaces and common functions, often related to leisure and tourism: panoramic walkways (among others, the restyling of Newton Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant in Brooklyn, completed in 2017 by Ennead Architects), educational centers and exhibitions (as Sunset Park Material Recovery Facility in Brooklyn, 2014, by Selldorf Architects), sport facilities (see the ski slope on the roof of the Amager Resource Center of Copenhagen, designed by BIG and built in 2017). Contemporary waste treatment plants are undergoing a resignification, performed through architecture. In the framework of a deeper understanding of environmental issues as social, cultural and political as well, these structures involve citizens as actors in the city metabolism, fostering collective forms of citizenship able to make use of public spaces and facilities as places where interaction and experience happen, rather than consumption.

2.3. Circular Architecture

As illustrated in 1.1, the extended investigation conducted around Circular Economy has unveiled on one hand a problematic relationship between this paradigm and architectural design. On the other hand, CE application to design opens promising perspectives in many terms,

above all regarding the necessity of a reverse infrastructure supporting the reverse logistic entailed by CE. This infrastructure is mainly administrative and logistical but is supported by a necessary physical counterpart: a repertoire of forms, tools, spaces and uses to envision, to be accurately identified and designed around the reverse processes entailed by circular paradigm.

Moreover, case studies examined in the research have given an outline of the final appearance of circular products of design. Their aesthetic is mainly casual, coming from assemblages and common processes: tools, tips, strategies and techniques are shared, as well as spaces and appliances. A useful development of this research would be to understand if circular architecture could have a peculiar aesthetic beyond that of the assemblage.

2.4. Evolving Practices

The changing relationship with consumption is affecting the practice of design: to work as an architect means today having to deal with many new and fundamental elements in the system: "the code of classical modernity appears today as a rigid concept, overwhelmed by commerce fluidity, innovation invasion, global economy ungovernability, the crisis of environmental pollution" (Branzi, 2006: 16). Tastes and necessities are consequent of this fluidity: architectural firms must perform design work addressing multiple simultaneous issues and keeping the object of design usable and accessible. It is brightly clear how the neoliberal age of the success of iconic, shocking and super-authorial architecture is over: archistars' expensive designs are at sidereal distances from the main concerns composing the global debate, from the

economic leanness influencing the profession, from the lifestyle, the taste and the power of the public. The productions of the "global, technocorporate machine" (Zaera-Polo, 2016) are rigid over time and in the appearance: they are undoubtedly related to the personal brand of their authors, hired more for the advertising effects of their names rather than the actual absolute fitness of their work to the specific assignments. In the late-recession era, where even renting a car is a political act and, thanks to social media, anyone's capable of influence, the cult of personality around archistars is fading away and the exclusive machine foraging their closed élite is progressively dismantled by a "sweet radicalism" (Rocca, 2013), by the democratization of the visibility, by the plurality of professional narrations finding a voice thanks to the media, by the 'sustainability' requirements - relevant as a blazoned signature, by the unpopularity surrounding rare huge capitals invested in magniloquent works. In an age where architectural culture contemplates topics and conditions contrasting consumerist logics, different professional approaches denounce a discipline looking for possible new operational tools in evolved reality conditions.

Several contemporary practices report a professional activity aimed less and less at the production of form: they suggest a practice less focused on the design of architecture's hardware and more committed to the study of the software (Till, 2012) and of the processes preceding and following the building of the object. This focus on the software validates Carlo Ratti's thesis about future scenarios for architect's role, moving from the observation of the evolution of open source, collective softwares (Ratti, 2014). The growing

accessibility to ideas enabled by the web opens promising perspectives in terms of wide conception of design: global creative potentialities can be shared and employed to study better solutions to local problems. This scenario encompasses a reconsideration of the role of designer similar to that implied in the furniture collection *Autoprogettazione* (Mari, 1974), signed by Enzo Mari in 1974 and widespread as a simple manual for the DIY construction. The principle has been resumed more recently by the phenomenon of open source architecture: several practices are developing specific projects, which design is made freely available, as well as open and participated construction systems, conceived to be increased and widespread by users. The objective is to replicate the value embedded in a good design by reusing it as many times as possible, to pursue an overall increase of general value. These examples shift the designers' role towards "programmer architects", focused on the elaboration of architectural scripts (Ratti, 2014: 115) for the use of the space.

These professional directions are among the most promising taken by architecture practitioners who have grasped, for different reasons, the necessity - and the interest - to reconsider their contribution as not focused on the occupation of space but on the activation of specific qualities, on the triggering of relations and events, in a role defined by Ratti "curatorial" (Ratti, 2014: 118). An architect focused on the interlacing of different necessities and conditions, catalyzing the local/global scale of ecologies and economies involved in project, still masterminding, when necessary and possible, the process of materialization together with the supervision of actions and interactions.

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