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EARLY STAGE

(RE)ARCHITECTURE. THREE ISSUES FOR RECONSTRUCTION

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

PREEXISTENCE, HERITAGE, PRESENCE, ABSENCE, RUINS, ETHICS, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, SHARED IMAGINARY

DDR STATEMENT

The main tool of research is a deep analysis of built architecture through its entire life cycle: how monuments, buildings and urban areas appeared when they were first created and how they evolved?; which were the causes of its destruction and what were the visible consequences?; which was the gap between visible and invisible architects need to fill?; what was the proposed solution? In order to understand the reasons and the methods of reconstruction most viable way is the precise analysis and comparison of each case study. The analysis is not intended through a simplistic catalogue around a certain place or a certain time, rather the theme of reconstruction will be split in the various issues it is related to (i.e. ontological issue, ethical issue, practical issue) and for each them a corpus of case study will be set up. The will is to exhaustingly eviscerate each component of reconstruction so to best clarify the role of reconstruction as project of new architecture, both in the maintenance of built environment and in the act of re-establishing a new one that disappeared in time but lasts in collective memory and imaginary.

ABSTRACT

Reconstruction represent a crucial issue for architecture: the presence of a widespread heritage threatened by human and natural activities requires a reflection on the role of the project in the act of maintain the values and the codes of architecture and, eventually, physically restore them, stressing the practice beyond the common distinction between new and old. The research aims to investigate how architecture can deal with the project of reconstruction, intended as a project of architecture, willing to re-evoke cultural and material meanings of monuments, buildings or historic urban areas, in order to transmit values of the human environment and increase their historical knowledge to recover their beauty. (Re)Architecture is related to the possibility of the project of reconstruction of becoming a part of a broader process regarding presence of architecture.

(Re)Architecture

Three issues for reconstruction

Reconstruction means bringing the ability to conceive and design architecture back into play.
If new and old cannot exist together, then an unbridgeable gap has been created between present and past. Besides an history made of groundbreaking changes, there's another one made of continuity and projects of reconstruction.
As a result of catastrophic events or obsolescence phenomena, architecture of monuments, intended both as a single artifact or as a complex of buildings, can be missing in its original form, which may involve the danger of progressive oblivion of identity values. The research aims to investigate how architecture can deal with the project of reconstruction, intended as a project of architecture, willing to re-evoke cultural and material meanings of monuments, buildings, or historic urban areas, to transmit values of the human environment and increase their historical knowledge to recover their beauty. (Re)Architecture is related to the possibility of the reconstruction project becoming a part of a broader process regarding the presence of architecture.
Prefix re- is linked to the repetition of an action, in the same or opposite way, following different gradients of intensity, similarly with the concepts of "re-functionalization" or "rehabilitation." The idea of (Re)Architecture, therefore, anticipates the different possibilities for the project to re-present its original missing form in order to restore identity and symbolic values. The crucial open question for reconstruction is the ratio between what can be seen and what can't be seen anymore, between the potential existence of architectural remains and ruins and the existence of a prior image, taken as reference.
Reconstruction is sustained by the desire for continuity and conformity, continuity of a constructed memory that is also part of contemporary cultural self-construction. In order to understand the reasons for reconstruction, it is useful to remind that cultural knowledge can be variably shared and can persist and settle in the consciousness of individuals since knowledge factors can be repeated over time and applied to different contexts (1). Some cultural schemes are more persistent because they are related to a range of emotions that derive from experience; once a network of interconnected cultural schemes is created, it supplements the missing information even in the absence of direct cultural or physical experience. Project of reconstruction is intended to re-evoke the normal state of architecture. So architecture emanates its original aura that indicates it as a capital masterpiece for art and urbanity, corresponding to the phase of its existence that best lies in the collective memory.
Once an image is firmly settled in memory it becomes a model.
The concept of the original in architecture is very labile, what is recognized as purely original has been fixed thanks to a series of repairs and restorations over time: the development of art and architecture has always occurred through imitation, adaptation, citation and repetition. When the image of a building is firmly sedimented in the memory and collective imaginary, it becomes a model, regardless of its physical or static factual conditions, belonging to a repeatable code. As the transmission of culture occurs through shared and recognized codes of language, also in architecture the reconstruction the recovery of the meaning of heritage, when done according to a precise code and lexicon. The theme of reconstruction raises three fundamental issues: an ontological issue, regarding the meaning and the value of reconstruction; an ethical issue, leading choices and sensibility and a pragmatic issue on how to proceed in such a delicate project physically.

Ontology

Reconstruction needs to be considered part of the entire architecture process, not as an extraordinary option. It is rather a possibility to re-active architecture, to re-establish missing buildings and to re-compose urban landscapes. This has to do with a profound shift in our understanding of time and concerns our relationship to the future and the past. To the extent that the future has ceased to be a projection surface for renewal and change, the past offers itself in precisely this function. The past has taken on a quality once attributed exclusively to the future, that of an inexhaustible resource for renewal and change. The historical horizon is reorganized as a background to keep pace with the changing consciousness of the present in order to restore and renew the past. Reconstruction differs from eclecticism for the past is no longer brought into the present through historical empathy, but rather through the faithful reconstruction of vanished historic buildings: it is an archival architecture based on exact illustrations and descriptions. When Verona's bridges were bombed at the end of WWII (fig. 1), municipality decided to re-build the most ancient one, Ponte Pietra, dated back to II century AD, in the same aspect it was , referring to precise models and drawings to atone the drama of the war (fig. 2).

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Ethics

Reconstructions raise an ethical question for the ratio between original contents and their replication and the legitimacy of reconstruction from a social and political point of view. Every project is the result of socio-political operations. Reconstruction is also defined by scientific, ideological and political strategies, economic interests, aesthetic demands, social expectations and discourses, individual and collective memories. One of reconstruction's main aims is to make physical past a reality, producing a three-dimensional emblem of architecture. The reconstruction of the Hellenistic Stoa of Attalus in Athens represents a major example different social and political dynamics affecting a project; while serving as Agora Museum for the American school of Classical Studies at Athens, the reconstruction of the Stoa also represented a firm bond between USA and Greece at the beginning of the Cold War. The monumental size of the building, located on the ancient Stoa site, contrasts the surrounding ruins, closing the eastern border of the Agora with a coherent balance between the Ephesteion and the Parthenon on the top of the Acropolis. Although it became a beautiful ornament for Athens, the reconstruction was validated by highly symbolic implications, in response to political conditions. It creates a parallelism between the USA and eternal values of democracy and liberty of Ancient Greece, as pointed out by US President Dwight Eisenhower while describing Stoa's symbolic dimensions as "a living memorial to the voice of freedom, speaking from the past to the present in the common tradition of Greece and America" (2).

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Pragmatism

In its application, reconstruction requires the scientific knowledge of building techniques. As a language cannot be understood without respecting the common and shared codes of grammar and syntax, also reconstruction has to operate in the same way. The true meaning of architecture is also related with techniques and materials. Nowadays, on the Acropolis, Greeks are replacing concrete elements from the Parthenon, which were realized after 1931 Athens Charts, with perfect duplicates carved in marble, extracted in the same quarry as it was for the ancient temple. Indeed, at the beginning there will be a visible difference that will anyway disappear during the few years. This is just an irrelevant time compared to the entire history of the Parthenon, but it permits a correct vision and appearance of the most iconic architecture of ancient Greece.

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

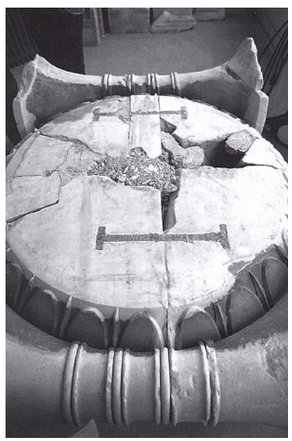

Fig. 7

Endnotes

(1) Strauss C., Quinn N. (2000): »Un'antropologia cognitivo-culturale«, in Robert Borofsky (Ed.), L'antropologia culturale oggi, Roma, Meltemi, pp. 348-361

(2) Sakka (2013): »A Debt to Ancient Wisdom and Beauty: The Reconstruction of the Stoa of Attalos in the Ancient Agora of Athens«, in: Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens 82, p. 212

Image references

Fig. 1 - 1945, Ponte Pietra after bombing, Foto archivio Piero Gazzola

Fig. 2 - 1959, Ponte Pietra fully reconstructed, Foto archivio Piero Gazzola

Fig. 3 - Works on Stoa of Attalus, ACSCA archive, www.agora.acsca.net

Fig. 4 - Works on Stoa of Attalus, ACSCA archive, www.agora.acsca.net

Fig. 5 - Artisan carving marble elements, Marconi, Paolo (1999): Materia e significato. La questione del restauro architettonico, Roma, Laterza, p. 108

Fig. 6 - Parthenon column, Marconi, Paolo (1999): Materia e significato. La questione del restauro architettonico, Roma, Laterza, p. 107

Fig. 7 - Parthenon capitel with reinforce elements, Marconi, Paolo (1999): Materia e significato. La questione del restauro architettonico, Roma, Laterza, p. 108