

AS NERVI WROTE...

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In the early 1960s, Nervi wrote that “it is clearly impossible to bring the construction industry to such a high level that every building can become an artwork, yet this is in the scope of its possibilities, and it would be very important under the moral, economic and social point of view to direct our construction activity towards fulfilling the characteristics of good functionality, good economic return, that is to say towards a construction correctness from which today we are too often removed.”¹ Nervi wrote this in a book with an eloquent title: *Building Correctly*, and building correctly (i.e. with an objective completeness) was one of the utopias of the late modern movement. A utopia based on reaching a correctness which is able to capitalize modern language by *stabilizing it definitively* (the phrase belongs to Ernesto Nathan Rogers); all of this in a concurrence which, in making the built work, would hold together the cultural, social and technical projects. From the pages of Nervi’s book there surfaces some unconcealed satisfaction, the same that in the early 1960s, just before changing style completely, made Philip Johnson claim that: “The battle of the modern has by now been won!” On the other hand, while Nervi exalted correctness, the technique of reinforced concrete, steel and prefabrication had already reached a degree of development that would have made a Viollet Le Duc or a Perret very happy. Yet such victory is very short lived. The ideology of *building correctly* soon

loses consensus, in some extreme instances becoming even a non-value. For those who enter the profession in the 1960s, the slogan then becomes no longer *building correctly* but *building expressively*, the sign of a profound change of paradigm which sees in communication with mass society, the affluent society, the main operational target. Who pays for such paradigm shift is the discipline’s autonomy, or thinking that within the profession’s rules one could find all the answers. We are in the 1960s, the expansive apex of the western market. Also Architecture is infected by such euphoria: new materials (plastic, silicon materials) and new shapes (geodetic domes, for instance) become objects of admiration for a public that feels, lives and anticipates a future that is already at hand. Yet the real revolution is not given by the inception of new materials and new forms, but it is the one started in the 1950s by the big American architectural offices, that of the new organization of processes, both of design and building. It is from there that the real revolution starts, one that is based on the ideology of the built object as a result of an assembly process of different components eventually wrapped by a sealed shell. In short, the establishment of a new organization of work, both in the design and the building phase, shapes a tectonic system only partially edited in the modern, that of shells. History, as Arnold Toynbee claimed, feeds on meaningful coincidences, which are hard to explain. We can thus consider the architecture of shells both as the outcome of a revolution in the production processes, and as the effect of the revolution brought about

by the advent of the mass media. Releasing, not only under the tectonic but also under the stylistic point of view, the facades from the building's body allows in fact the former to register with an ever increasing freedom the icons and the patterns one needs to make the affluent society happy. In other words, the organisation of the big American offices, such as SOM in the days of Bunshaft and Graham, in the following decade meets Venturi and Scott-Brown's *decorated shed*. The United States are the home of a form of postmodernism that only later will make history a friend.

Some time ago I wrote a book titled *Naked Architecture* in which I collected a series of contemporary architectures that, referring conceptually to nudity, seen under a strictly iconographic point of view, showed their opposing stance towards the postmodern shell.²

An opposition that by now we see in a number of places (I am referring to Swiss or South American architecture, or to the return of brutalism in Germany) but which is unable to undermine the superpower of shells, particularly in the large size. On the other hand, the revamping of shells and assembled construction in the last decade, when these were starting to show the first symptoms of yielding, is linked to those provisions for energy containment that have imposed the application on the building of many more shells than those Venturi and Scott-Brown hypothesized.

In my view, today we clearly see a vertical rift between the assembled or the shells' construction and that which can still be referred to Modernism, to its conceptual and tectonic bareness. A rift containing countless expressive pockets that attempt to mediate the two hypotheses. Contemporary Italian architecture, for instance, still focused on the values of *finitio* and *concinnitas*, therefore generally reluctant towards the

culture of assembly, is among those that are more interested in this mediation and the results are often interesting. Going back in time, another crucial moment in the tectonic evolution related to figurative evolution were the 1990s, when Rem Koolhaas imposed to it a substantial acceleration. In spite of becoming the advocate of turbo-capitalism, Koolhaas thinks as a Marxist through the Hegelian categories of historical materialism. For him, given the actual situation that for market and communication reasons imposes the assembled construction and shells, it is useless to oppose such condition with regressive utopias: on the contrary, it is essential to acknowledge this situation by operating a radicalization of the conditions the market dictates through their unrestrained spectacularization. This is a position that absorbs from Marxism the certainty that operating is the direct consequence of the conditions that produced it and that it is useless, it is something for *beautiful souls* (the phrase is Hegel's, and was scornfully directed to Novalis) to try and counter such state of things. The real is therefore rational in any case and the new rationality corresponds to the staging (I am in this case using a Marxist phrasing which doesn't belong to me at all) of the capital's contradictions, that as such will lead to an implosion of the system and more. It is therefore necessary to ride the tiger, and the best will be the one who will ride it, even deconstructing the shells, without reins and without qualms. Paolo Desideri is in accord with Koolhaas when he writes that "it is necessary to take note of the necessity of a likewise radical transformation of the ways and strategies for producing a project. Starting from the crises of the modern representations and management processes and from the resulting numeric increase of the variables that the project is called to

confront, every figurative approach based on self-referentiality and disciplinary autonomy appears for instance less and less legitimate and always more inadequate.” And with apodictic tones, typical of the 1990s, he concludes: “today form does not admit any aprioristic legitimization, it cannot invoke any poetic authority outside the system itself.”³ Desideri thus wishes for a coincidence between project and construction, one in which the former is completely subjected to the latter. In this new condition induced by the productive system, the designer is actually transformed into an assembler and a director, more or less authoritative, of the ever more complex processes that exist between the conception and the construction of the work. He finally rises to a political role, and it is not a coincidence that people such as Stefano Boeri see the profession very much in a political sense, actually relegating authorship to a secondary role or at least instrumental to the direct action on site.

Certainly until the late 2000s this was the scenario’s dominant ideology, one that was no doubt winning in terms of the turbo-capitalism’s large quantities and big figures, that is in its *bigness*. Over time, especially in the last few years, the forms of resistance to this ideology have increased, to the point that today we see a divided scene, where on the one hand we have the shells’ architects who, generally speaking, correspond to the well known archistars, while on the other we see a new generation of architects-craftsmen, of *beautiful souls* that stubbornly refuse to be subjected to the rapacity of the conditions induced by the relations of production. On the one hand, therefore, Marx’s belated followers (even if no longer communists, but capitalists with no remorse), on the other Weber’s, who try to oppose the disenchantment and don’t give up thin-

king that ideas can change the world as they depend only partially on it. Between these two poles there are almost countless intermediate positions that strive for finding an escape route from what, at a first sight, may seem an antinomy, and do so trying to put in practice that *building correctly* Nervi spoke of. The fact remains that big revolutions in architecture, paradigm shifts, happen with and through tectonic revolutions, and that of assembled or shells’ architecture (the two terms do not coincide perfectly, yet they are very similar) was the last of these revolutions, the importance of which was such that it has attracted to itself even the idea of a city. Without shells, we would never have had Bilbao’s Guggenheim, the building which, according to Ignasi de Solà Morales, is “a compendium to the city.” Yet I am convinced that this paradigm has already reached a critical point, or that it at least shows clear signs of weakening. Aesthetic sensibility today seems to be increasingly oriented (and this was the sense of my book *Naked Architecture*) towards a reduction of the power of images and mass communication. But, particularly in the large size, the real estate market imposes its own rules, which are often strict and we cannot think of a building (particularly tall ones) that is oblivious to the theme of the shell or that renounces to components to be assembled during construction. This issue, which, I insist, is not devoid of ideological connotations, remains wide open. Around it, most of architecture’s future is at stake.

1. Pierluigi Nervi, *Costruire Correttamente*, Hoepli, Milan 1964, p.8.
2. Valerio Paolo Mosco, *Naked Architecture*, Skira, Milan 2012.
3. Paolo Desideri, *La forma come risorsa*, “l’Industria delle Costruzioni”, n. 423, January-February 2012, pp.4-19.