

THE BUILDING FIRST LODGERS

Giovanni La Varra

Building site meetings are the first attempt at living in a place that is still unfit for habitation. In a future operating theatre, in a sitting room one barely figure out, in an underground garage or even just in a future meeting room, makeshift furniture is set up, drawings of plans and elevations are hung on walls. The weekly ritual of a building site meeting is also the moment in which the construction site gets turned off and work is put on hold; the team of designers, the client and the construction manager, technicians and suppliers, the building company's managers and safety staff make an orderly recognition at the end of which they meet up to "see how we are".

During the meeting, the architect designer — who more and more rarely acts also as construction manager — lives through a strange situation of centrality and encirclement.

The meeting is the post-industrial form of work. Most of the time, contemporary work develops through meetings. The meeting is today's pure form of operating, ongoing meetings that amount to moments of preparation to actions or further meetings. The parcelling of decisional processes has made the confrontation between different levels ever more significant. Everybody knows that single individual decisions have relevance somewhere else, the meeting doesn't have the function of managing the flow of things but rather of tackling collateral effects that are constantly produced.

The evidence of this all, in the building site, is absolute. And it is not a coincidence that *Skype* communication has not yet entered the building site meeting. Who is there decides. Who is not, has neither representation nor power.

Obviously, the dimension and complexity of the building site changes the nature of the problem and the intensity of relationships between the sides, but not the substance. In any case, the figure of the architect designer is meant to provide answers to the production of those collateral effects that don't actually correspond to the unexpected. A collateral effect is not unforeseen: one could say it is unfathomable. It is a question of scale. As if the project's scale had not allowed one to glimpse in good time what would sooner or later come out and present itself as a problem, hidden in the drawing and not considered with enough detail.

The architect's centrality in the building site is a paradox: the ever increasing crowd of professional figures around the drawing table has enhanced the architect's centrality and, at the same time, reduced his or her field of action. The architectural project becomes an Esperanto that allows communication with and between the other disciplines and competencies.

However, the building site decision process is altogether different from the one the architect has experienced and managed during the design stage. The agenda of a building site meeting is normally defined by the construction company. It is commanded by urgency but also by the coordination and sequence of the different working phases. The apodictic character of

the drawing mellows down in the flow of operative decisions, tight schedules, in the tension of necessity. Even more than the completed construction, the following phases of the building site are the true moments in which a deep reflection on the project is set in motion. The collection of collateral effects puts the blueprint in a perspective which, in the best scenario, corrodes its edges but often leaves its characters intact. The building site is a kind of ongoing biopsy of the architectural project. And the building site meeting the diagnostic phase of the bioptic process. The articulation of building site meetings also corresponds to a strange deconstruction process of the architectural project. Contrary to expectations, as the building takes shape the project is deconstructed. The slow composition of the design stage is overturned in a number of sudden deconstruction gestures, each one articulated through meetings and inspections. In the sequence of meetings one sees the emerging of some momentary protagonists, who are destined to go back into the shadow. There is a sequence of short epochs: first the foundations, structures and floors, then the arrival on stage of plasterers and plasterboard installers, up to the final catwalk of finishers. The architect's and construction manager's reverse shot changes from week to week, as the project is temporarily entrusted to single competencies and given back with features that get closer and closer to the final stage. Such deconstruction work, with its weekly staging, is a remarkable experience in terms of checking project choices. Each building site meeting focuses on a precise aspect. It works like a magnifying lens, drawing attention on one aspect at a time. For the architect designer, such deconstructing vertigo is the true legacy of the building site experience. Seeing things one by one

casts a retroactive light on all the project phases. The more so, particularly on public commissions, when the building stage takes place significantly later than the design stage. The building site then becomes a strange *déjà-vu* phenomenon. Drawn things take shape, before as samples on the meeting table, then as *mock-ups* and finally, once fostered, as parts of the building. In this sense, if the building site experience prefigures the future, the continuous meetings during construction are a way to rethink the past experience of the design stage. Thus delayed, the building site experience is always a material that is difficult to handle. To observe the project's slow deconstruction produces an odd confusion. To acquire the building site experience means to recompose its fragments, to insert the different parts into the flow of architectural sense, to discover with a certain surprise the irrelevance of some carefully measured choices and the relevance of others, that were underestimated.