

DIVIDE ET IMPERA

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The value of what follows is absolutely personal and relative: I therefore intend to keep open the (very realistic) possibility of contradicting myself in the future.

Along with the detail, the building site is one of the myths of universities, one teachers use in order to endow with a sense of concreteness what is not yet concrete. The building site is seen as the seat of truth, the place where the chickens come home to roost, where theory and lines meet reality. I believe I have never talked about the building site with my students and there is no doubt I have never taken them to visit one of mine.

In my view, the building site is an intimate, personal experience, the most private phase of the design process. To me, it is like the childbirth moment: after that, all becomes public, all belongs to the world. Before, it does not. We like a lovely pot belly and talk about the child, their name, about expectations and hopes. Yet childbirth is a private business: the moment the mystery is revealed.

My building sites start at a very early stage, usually before I sign the assignment, when I clean my drafting table and prepare the sheet for the first drawing, cutting the paper, positioning the pins and cleaning the square rulers. In that precise moment, in my head there begins a building site stage at which you still don't know whether there will follow a final step: and yet,

after all one doesn't care about that future, because construction has already begun with imaginary building blocks and pouring, made up plasters and roof tiles, all summarized on paper by the lead pencil's imprint.

But experience feeds presumption, and the fact of having brought to conclusion a number of projects, of having gone through the phases of construction, often risks to hinder the production of new thoughts that, inescapably, get checked — and often mutilated — by the filter of experience. The main effort thus consists in starting always from scrap, in belittling as much as possible (or actually in forgetting) difficulties ... and in doing the same with success.

For me, the building site and its rules are design tools, which become the more interesting the more they evolve and change in time and places.



The first draft already employs these tools, nourishing a process which I would like never to be sequential so that the building site's tools, its numbers and restrictions can translate into compositional elements, suggestions for shape and use. Sometimes, even decorative elements.

I often find myself thinking about when one work can be called finished. If, as an architect, I believe this happens when my contribution is no longer needed, on the other hand I am drawn to think that the work finishes at a moment which is independent from the end of construction. It happens in fact that the project's soul reveals itself when the building process is over and everything, finishing included, contributes to making it visible. At other times, instead, the soul appears at a certain point during construction: it strongly reveals itself, yet is destined to undergo the taming brought about by the subsequent stages, that are instrumental to the structure's practicality, to its functionality, its use and "appropriateness".

When this happens, I think my work has come to the end and I would prefer not to go forward, as any successive operation cannot but dilute such magic. From then on, every choice fights against the original design in order to keep that aura which has suddenly appeared, and which, being unplanned, gets the upper hand. I think this is the reason why I love ruins and I perceive the building site, to quote Robert Smithson, as a *ruin in reverse*. Ruins leave all that is unnecessary behind, and exposing its soul, they show the essence of the original design. That is why we have good ruins but also meaningless ruins, and that is why in some building sites one can reach levels of poetry which are not always visible in the finished work.

But we are not sculptors, so we cannot avoid finishing: the architect's unfinished is a formal and aesthetic choice which cannot hinder function. We must make practicable, inhabitable, sellable, liveable, walkable, cleanable, maintainable, heatable, air conditionable... all we build. We must thus insert our work inside a real



world, accepting the limit that divide our work from the artist's.

I have explained how for me the building site begins at the very initial stage of a project, and how for me it is a design tool. In the same way, I believe the design phase does not end with the beginning of construction, but that the building site is a moment of maturation for



the original idea.

In that moment, making and design are in a state of co-participation, producing a system in which the spaces of intervention, instead of reducing with the progress of construction, open up to fresh thinking, designing and testing opportunities. It is a never ending process, which can go beyond the design's boundaries to influence the choices of other projects, be they upcoming or under construction.

Not only an elastic process, then, but a single work in progress, in which the stages mix up and the end of the *oeuvre* never coincides with the end of the project, which often involves works that are wide apart in time and space.

It is licit to think that such a mythological vision of the building site is by now anachronistic, and that it does not correspond to the way construction is managed today. On the other hand, I believe this lens might help us recognize the potential and the strengths of the actors involved in our projects (*project and safety managers, accountants, builders...*), freeing us from the risk of taking shelter in predefined positions.

In order not to lose the battle on quality, architects must evolve and adapt to new processes, without specializing and without losing their global vision.

When we speak of the building site as the place and time of construction, we often forget that it is the meeting place of very diverse cultures: the place and time in which the different actors and humanities must coexist, speaking a common language and following a plot outline in which roles must be defined beforehand, hierarchies must be clear and all interpretations must interact in a constructive way. The building site is the time-place of a *performance* that is the object of contention for many actors, but to which the architect often

renounces, as he or she sees in it a risk for their original idea rather than a possibility of evolution.

That the economic dimension (and often also the financial one) should determine the choices connected with the project's construction and technology must not induce one to pull out. On the contrary, this should spur us towards a deeper knowledge of all those disciplines that are defining the future of building ever more prominently. New data, new elements and new limits to be read as growth opportunities that can offer new possibilities for controlling the project. Only a wide, non specialized culture can give back a role in the building site to the architect: an interdisciplinary culture that can take into consideration the project's diverse dimensions in order to use them within a complex process, inaccessible to "specialized" professionals.

I therefore believe the rationalization and industria-



lization of the building site represent an opportunity for producing new projects, different (in form and content) and rich in that culture which hangs always in the balance between humanism and the technology which is peculiar to our profession.