



The plentifulness of scarcity

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New York City, USA. A flock of steel beams and glass panels is spotted in the early morning while gently flying over the streets of Manhattan, headed towards an empty plot facing the Hudson river, where they magically assemble in mid air, giving shape to a dense complex of shiny skyscrapers. An inelegant fantasy for the city of 9/11, this is actually the sequence of a promotional clip¹ recently made for Hudson Yards: «the largest private real estate development in the history of the United States»², currently under construction with projects by — among others — SOM, Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Heatherwick Studios.

Used in many recent developments around the globe, the deceiving animation of the self-building-building is a rhetorical device aimed at a precise purpose, namely the commodification of architecture through its spectacularization: a subtle marketing strategy that, together with other similar tactics of seduction, offers an insightful glimpse on the kind of mystification architectural production and communication are subjected to nowadays, under the growing pressure of the real estate market. A pressure so persistent and ubiquitous that it has been widely studied and accepted by now, leading to the assumption that land speculation dwells at the very core of architecture itself. Something that, nevertheless, is not always true.

Unquillo (Córdoba), Argentina. A group of architects (Solanito Benitez, Solano Benitez, Gloria Cabral, María Rovea and Ricardo Sargiotti) have pressurized water being cast on a zigzagged brick wall to the

point that its bricks disappear, leaving a nude mortar framework as the only trace of the previous structure: a brickwork with no bricks, a transparent concrete wall... how did they do it?

A tiny installation for the MUVA art exhibition (April – May 2014), the “brick wall with its final absence” (*el muro de ladrillos con su ausencia final*) presents many of the elements that characterize the work of Gabinete de Arquitectura, Asunción-based architecture practice founded in 1987 by Solano Benitez, which he now runs together with his partner, Gloria Cabral, and his son Solanito. The project, in fact, recurs to local materials that are cheap and easy to find (mud and concrete); it employs them in a rational but experimental way (the bricks “disappear” because they are made of dried mud — a material that is easily disintegrated by water —, while the mortar resists because it’s made of concrete); it optimizes their use (the bricks’ mud, once dissolved, falls back to the ground where it was originally taken from, being ready to be used again); it innovates their structural behaviour (the remaining mortar framework performs as an unusual construction system); it reaches, by doing so, an unexpected formal configuration (a wall made of holes); and it expresses a poetic condition (the project as a celebration of the idea of “absence”) by means of its physical presence.

Geographically and ideologically far from the global “starchitecture” market, which they look at with unconcealed sarcasm, the work of GabDeArq is deeply rooted in the environmental, economic and technological conditions of Paraguay, which define the limits inside of which they are managing to develop an architectural research of great interest and relevance for our times.

Observed from a historical perspective, it could be maintained that the work of GabDeArq falls within Kenneth Frampton’s category of Critical Regionalism, whose fundamental strategy is «to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place [finding inspiration] in



such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a tectonic derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of the given site»³. As a matter of fact, all these conditions characterize the architecture of GabDeArq, although it is important to stress how the way in which they «mediate universal civilization with local culture», isn’t the outcome of an *arrière-garde* stance (one which, in Frampton’s words, critically distances itself from the drawbacks of both poles), but rather the result of the architects’ «optimum use of [the available] universal technique» in a context intrinsically defined by scarcity. I’ll explain myself.

One of the most recognizable features of the architecture of GabDeArq is the use of brick as construction material. Rather than being an ideological choice meant to engage in a dialogue with the local tradition (in Paraguay, brick building became important in the 16th Century, when commercial ships heading to England would leave on ground the bricks used as ballast on the westward trip), it is instead the vast



and cheap availability of such material, what explains its systematic employment in projects that, in the architects' words, are substantially aimed at «making bricks do things we didn't know they could do».

This last sentence is of great importance, as it explains the fundamentally experimental approach of GabDeArq, whose work is based on trial-and-error processes meant to bring bricks to their structural limits, given that «the only relation we have with matter is the possibility to imagine a different condition for it», as Benitez claims, adding that «an architecture that is not experimental, is useless». The fact is that Benitez is not interested in bricks per se, but rather in the possibilities to express human intelligence that are allowed by the experimental use of bricks. As he says, quoting a Paulo Mendes da Rocha's joke on a famous sentence by Louis Kahn, «the brick doesn't desire anything, it is stupid! It's the action of man that can transform matter into monument» (*el ladrillo no desea nada, es tonto! Es la acción del hombre la que puede transformar la materia en monumento*).

Intelligence, as Benitez claims, is not only the condition that we all share: it is also what allows us to overcome the material and cultural restrictions that define the way in which we understand — and therefore transform — reality. Using imagination as a tool, intelligence is infact capable of questioning the very boundaries of the problems we are confronted with, transforming what would be traditionally understood as a limit — a low budget, a provision of materials with poor mechanical properties, a rudimental technology at disposal, etc. — into a field of opportunities for innovation. It is in this sense that, when referring to the research of GabDeArq, Benitez admits that what he's interested in is the construction of «an overcoming human condition» (*una condición humana superadora*), rather than in the construction of a bricks and concrete building, tying the ethical dimension of his work with its capacity to provide exemplary evidences of what intelligence can actually do, when applied in architectural terms.

As a matter of fact, there's practically no GabDeArq design that doesn't show this tension towards an overcoming condition. In the project for their own office, given the very small budget at disposal, the architects had to find a way to build 100 square meters for the same cost of 15, which they did, by reducing the amount of bricks needed thanks to the optimization of the structural system (the frames of the two *fenêtres en bande*, for example, behave as beams, allowing the perimetral walls to be thinner but stiffer), as well as by using reclaimed materials and manually prefabricated elements. In the project for the Teletón Rehabilitation Center, among other experiments, they invented a structural system made of triangular brick modules, which could be easily prefabricated on site and then assembled on a wooden formwork, giving form to the beautiful reticular vault under which runs the path that leads from the site entrance to the main building of the complex. In the project for the house of Benitez's mother, the cheap bricks used for the ceramic and concrete roof of the living room have been laid diagonally on the formwork, so that their vertical projection could be from 1 to 1,5 cm higher, and therefore improving, although slightly, their structural performance.



One of the reasons of its success, the work of GabDeArq expresses a way of thinking architecture that is truly Modern, in the purest sense of the word. Unweakened by the doubts that have shaped the architecture of second half of the XX century, and uncorrupted by the easy seduction of today's society of spectacle and finance, it clearly shows what extraordinary results the belief in poetic reason and progress can still lead to. And although it may well be that the condition of scarcity in which they inevitably operate shares part of the credit, offering a motivation for constant improvement as well as a protection from the dynamics of the star system (but for how long?), we can't but long for more architectures capable of celebrating civilization in such a powerful way.

1.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYKGW7nJmp4>

2.

<http://www.hudsonyardsnewyork.com/the-story>

3.

Kenneth Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle 1987, pp. 16-30.