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From the Terrazza Triennale to the architect’s role: a dialogue with Paolo Brescia

The founder of OBR studio with Tommaso Principi talks about their project in Milan, their approach to the design and their ongoing projects. Ini presentation of the “Radiografia del contemporaneo”, our new series about contemporary architectures.



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How was the project at La Triennale conceived?

During the competition's site visit we were impressed by the sense of surprise that one experiences on the roof of the Palazzo dell'Arte's rooftop. The terrace, in fact, had always been closed to the public and, although we had been regular visitors of the Triennale Museum since we were students at the Politecnico di Milano, none of us knew about its existence. The view was stunning: we had the impression of being at the centre of everything.

Our desire was therefore to restore this "centrality" back to the Milanese, making this terrace become a super-public place experienced by all, a sort of urban room suspended over the Parco Sempione, overlooking the Castello Sforzesco and the new skyline of Milan.

However, I must admit that we were also under another sensation: that of being like dwarfs on the shoulders of a giant. Nothing could be invented, everything was already there. We almost wanted to feel small, to disappear, to be as light as possible, on tiptoe. Yet we did not intend to camouflage ourselves, but rather to outline an intervention that was "there since forever."

Thus, we thought of a glazed pavilion like a suspended pavilion over the park, set back from the perimeter of the historic building of Muzio, while reclaiming its structural grid.

How do you deal with the theme of building on the built?

I believe that building on the built requires a paradigm shift. Generally, it is thought that the act of building is finalized to the built, and that building and the built are between them an end/means. In reality I believe that the end/means precludes us from accessing the essential relationships between building and built.

It is clear that having to minimize further land consumption and to favour interventions that re-evaluate what we have received, building and built must acquire a new contemporary meaning within a unified vision. The architecture work, in fact, is not the sum of its parts, but rather a whole.

In building on the built there is no “style”, there is no difference between expressive logic and constructive logic. Architecture is poetic, in its classic meaning of knowing how to do (well). The technician knows how. The architect must wonder also why.

I am convinced that building on the built can produce a new beauty, which will celebrate the work of those who came before us and the lives of those who lived before us, in a way extending their life. This will be possible if the architect, as an ancient Greek, will be able to keep together theory and practice, action and thought, logic and sensibility.

What is your idea of beauty in architecture?

It is difficult to talk about beauty. People don’t talk of it for modesty. We look for it, we pursue it but in reality, I really don’t know what it is exactly. What I have understood is that like the Arab Phoenix, it is elusive. When you think you’ve reached it, you’ve already missed it.

What I know is that there isn’t only one beauty, but many beauties. In Xenophon’s

Memorabilia, Socrates says that a man beautiful at running differs from a man beautiful at combat, just as a shield beautiful for defence is different from a dart beautiful when shot. All things are beautiful in relation to what they have been conceived for. What is beautiful for running is ugly for fighting and vice versa. Therefore, for a given goal, certain things can be beautiful and good (kalòs kai agathòs) or ugly and bad.

At the same time, beauty can be everything and its opposite. On the western pediment of Delphi's temple, the four mottoes defining Greek beauty (the most just is the most beautiful, respect the limit, abhor arrogance, nothing in excess), based on order and harmony under Apollo's protection, find their counterbalance in the eastern pediment, where Dionysus, god of chaos, breaks all rules. This co-existence of these antithetical deities is not accidental, it is the irruption of chaos within harmony, of Dionysian beauty in the Apollonian one.

Nowadays, one can argue that beauty is mostly a value. A value that comes from afar, but that projects us towards the future; a long-standing value that unites those who are enlightened by it.

In architecture, beauty takes on an even more common meaning; it doesn't only belong to architects, but to everyone, just as a building, even if private, is still a public fact. It is not like a book that you can decide not to read. In the Polis beauty pertains also to responsibility: "I promise you that I will hand Athens back even more beautiful ". Beauty and good coincide. If it's not good, it's not even beautiful.

In architecture, beauty is also a contemporary matter, as it relates to thrift, diversity, complexity. But we should beware of demagogic clichés and of rhetoric abuses, otherwise beauty is transformed into a simple "passé partout concept", which, as vain do-gooding mechanism, blocks thought at a superficial level and makes magic disappear, just as the mythological phoenix.

In your case, building on the built, what kind of relationship does this

imply between context and architecture?

I think that the essence of the architectural work lies in its contingent conditions. There is no a-priori essence. It is “built” on the work’s contingencies, but never “applied” to it.

But, if it is true that the essence of the project is based on its contingencies, it is also true that it is the architecture that makes the place. We believe, in fact, that at a certain point architecture becomes a sort of “memory of an absolute future”, with its own life, beyond time that survives its functions.

It is between the contingent essence and the memory of an absolute future that we pursue the idea of an architecture that is “there since forever”, which enters the world becoming what it is, superimposing the present with the past and the future.

You have formed as a collective. What is your approach to the project?

When we founded OBR, we wanted to express our idea on an open research on building and at the same time emancipate ourselves from the typical configuration of hierarchical professional firms.

In OBR, everyone is equally engaged in the design process. Always working on different topics, we have learned to involve those who know more than us about specific fields, sharing the same common vision. Our initial choice of not wanting to specialize in given domains allows us to hybridize diverse know-hows, acquired in diverse experiences.

Design is not the goal, but the result. In this way the results will exceed the initial expectations. The project is not an individual matter, it is a common task.

Obviously, at the beginning of the process we do not all think exactly the same way, but we discuss, often even animatedly. After quite some time, I have to say that it is precisely this dialogue – above all mutual listening – that is the lifeblood of the design process.

Working together in OBR, we are all converging towards a certain vision of the

design as a collective, cooperative, evolutionary process, that we develop by crossing the borders, taking risks, even making mistakes, but still exploring the future and investigating the unknown, which then is the only objective to go to, if we have to go somewhere.

What does being an architect today mean to you?

As Paul Virilio states, today we live in a world that has become a world-city, where information, messages, images, things, people circulate… But it is also true that the city today is increasingly a city-world, with its ethnical, cultural and social diversities (denying in a way the illusions of the world-city).

It is on this uncertain terrain, suspended between city and world, that we think of architecture today, intended as the spirit of our time, as a mirror of our reality. Now, as reality is in constant evolution, I believe that as architects we are called to display its progress.

OBR's research has always been aimed at investigating the new ways of contemporary living. What kind of relationship do you envisage between building and living?

The act of building has in itself the sense of inhabiting, which in turn implies the sense of taking care (Heidegger mentioned the "Fourfold" of inhabiting, understood as "saving the earth, welcoming heaven, waiting for the divine, leading mortals").

Only if we know how to inhabit, then we can build. Therefore, building always starts from inhabiting.

On the other hand, it is also true that it is how we live that should determinate how we inhabit, and not vice versa.

So, the question is: if architecture deals with building, and if building implies knowing how to inhabit, which is determined by our living, then what contribution can architecture give to the lives of the people who live in the spaces we build?

I do not know if we will change the world through architecture, but I believe that, pursuing the idea of beauty as a common value, belonging to everyone and for everyone, then we can do something to improve it.

What are you working on?

We are currently engaged in the Emirates, Italy and India.

In Dubai we are leading a project to develop the Jafza zone, in front of Dubai Expo 2020. It consists of a multifunctional centre, which will extend through 3km along the highway towards Abu Dhabi. We envision it as a super-urban place, that fosters the encounter, the exchange and the unexpected discovery of things one isn't really looking for, which is in the end the essential feature of the public space. For this reason, we have conceived an open-air shaded promenade with natural lighting, inspired by the local Suq, and articulated in a series of internal plazas, positioned on different levels, that host diverse alternative mobilities, in continuity with Expo 2020. We'd like to demonstrate that in Dubai it is also possible to develop certain outdoor gathering activities without importing models from elsewhere, but thanks to the evolution of local typologies (just as the Suq), reinterpreted in a site-specific and contemporary key.

In Italy we are working mainly on the theme of "building on the built", as we are doing for the Generali office complex in Via Bassi in Milan where we are redeveloping the structures of a previous complex, for the Mitoraj Museum in Pietrasanta that we are designing within a decommissioned municipal market, for the reuse of the former Psychiatric Hospital of Genoa for CDP rethought with new functions open to the city, for the port and above all the back of the port of Santa Margherita Ligure which will become a new front of the city on the sea, for the complex of Marina Grande in Arenzano where we are re-naturalizing the old railway tunnel, and finally at Prato where together with Michel Desvigne we are building the Central Park within the historic walls on the ground of an old disused hospital.

In India we are building the Lehariya cluster in Jaipur with offices, art galleries, retail spaces and a hotel. In the absence of a real construction industry (as is the case for example, in China), our intention is to demonstrate that it is possible to develop a real estate project with a high degree of social sustainability, through the promotion of the local workforce, contributing in this way to the economic and cultural development of the territory. Together with Human Project, established by the activist Rajeev Lunkad and working with local artisans and artists, we have tried to produce an interchange from the small scale of art and craft to the grand scale of architecture, combining the parametric design of OBR with basic, local construction technology. In this case, the approach is that of *multiplicity*, understood as repetition (craft), and not as multiplication (industrial). The goal we are pursuing in India is not a project *for* India, but *by* India.

Italian version



About Author



Cristina Donati

Prima collaboratrice poi redattrice della testata online fin dagli esordi nel 2014. Prematuramente scomparsa nel 2021. Studia architettura a Firenze dove consegue un Dottorato di ricerca in storia dell'architettura. Dopo la laurea si trasferisce a Oxford dove collabora con studi professionali, si occupa di editoria e cura mostre per Istituti di cultura a Londra. Ha svolto attività didattica per la Kent State University (USA) con il corso di Theories of Architetcure. Scrive per numerose riviste internazionali e svolge attività di ricerca sull'architettura contemporanea e i suoi protagonisti. Dirige la collana editoriale «Single» sul progetto contemporaneo per la Casa Editrice Altralinea. E' autrice di saggi e monografie tra cui: «Michael Hopkins» (Skira, 2006); «L'innovazione tecnologica dalla ricerca alla realizzazione» (Electa, 2008); «RSH+P, Compact City» (Electa, 2014); «Holistic Bank Design» (Altralinea, 2015).

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