

## For a rough and essential architecture

### Notes for a contemporary architectural ethics through Mies and Rossi

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Starting from Vitruvio Tractatus, the theme dealt with is that of the relationship between the architectural project and the “Zeitgeist” (spirit of time), that is how architects and, consequently, architecture can not be influenced by the influence of the historical moment. Through the thought of two masters of architecture, Mies Van der Rohe and Aldo Rossi, true interpreters of their time, analysis leads, also through some philosophical references, to a reflection on the architectural project in the contemporary, with, at the end, a personal reflection around the topics of the contemporary architecture, “for a rough and essential architecture”.

*Keyword:* Mies Van der Rohe, Aldo Rossi, contemporary architecture

"Taking care" – this is, I think, the most cogent incipit in contemporaneity and posed by this call. We architects cannot avoid to take care of the world in which we live, we must know how to interpret it by returning an architecture that corresponds to it. Consequently, architecture, or the product of our doing, participates, must necessarily participate in the formation of the common good. Already Vitruvius emphasized this ethical necessity in the first pages of the first treatise in the history of architecture: "Philosophy (...) makes the architect magnanimous and makes sure that it is not arrogant, but rather flexible, impartial and, more importantly, faithful without greed (no work can indeed be carried out righteously in the absence of loyalty and moral integrity)"(1) The main pitfall that in this contemporary world undermines this inescapable concept of our profession is the vision, unfortunately very present in contemporary architecture, of the project as an individual act and therefore subjective and ultimately self-referential.

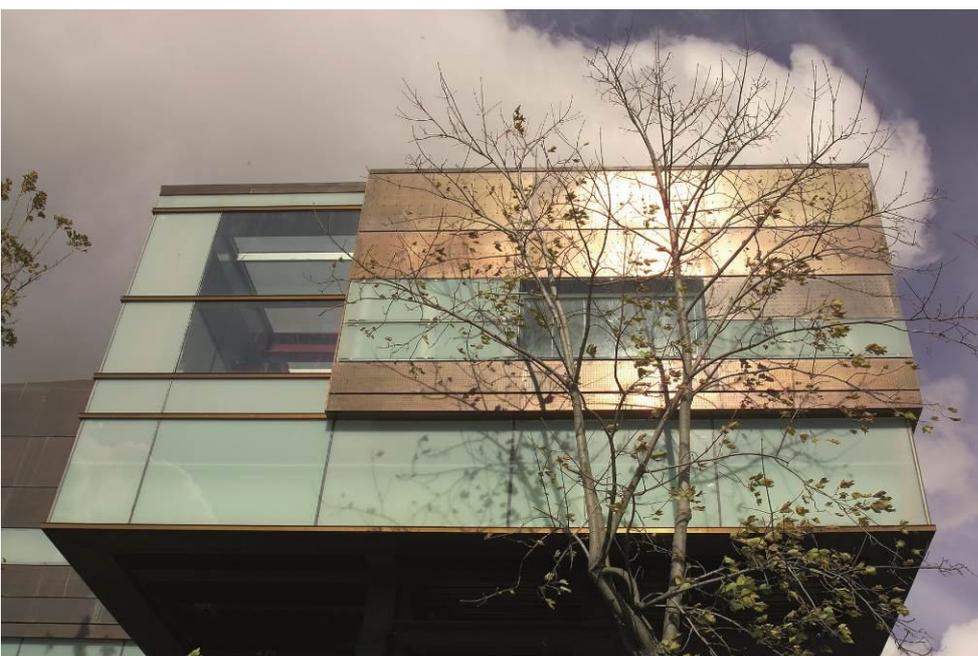
Before unraveling my thoughts on this aspect that is absolutely up to date, I would very briefly recall two figures apparently very distant from each other due to the formal outcomes of their architecture that have more than other masters of architecture know how to interpret their time, before in modernity and therefore in post-modernity, corresponding with their architecture to the spirit of their time. If the formal outcomes were very different, the essence of their architecture coincides through a reading of "sense" and not of form, finally bringing architecture into a dimension of meaning and not of "pure visibilism". The formal synthesis of their thought was so evident and exact that was, not by chance, trivialized by the many who saw and still read architecture as a merely formal, and therefore individual process.



Roma, Nazzaro River Museum. Photo by Luigi Filetici (1994-2000)



Pitigliano (Italy), Exposition Center. Photo by Alessandro Ciampi (1999-2000)



San Vincenzo al Volturno, Archeological Museum. Photo by Alessandro Ciampi (1998)



Roma, Library SS. Quattro Coronati. Photo by Alessandro Ciampi (2002)

I'm talking about Mies Van der Rohe and Aldo Rossi. I want to start from them both for autobiographical reasons as they represented for me, certainly along with others but more than others, two theoretical landmarks already starting from the university classrooms of Valle Giulia in the late 80s and even today in similar Ferrara classrooms, albeit on the other side of the "barricade".

If we do not stop at the banality of Mies' "Less is more", a motto that in reality he quoted only on rare occasions, if we focus on the statement, repeated in his writings and in his numerous conferences, of the architect as 'of his own time': "It is not the architectural forms that make the constructions of the past seem so meaningful, but the fact that the ancient temples, the basilicas, as well as the medieval cathedrals, are not the work of individual personalities, but the creation of an era"(2). A good architect, to be such, "must be of his own time" in the sense that he must interpret the time he is living. This, and certainly not the nursery rhyme of "less is more" is the true meaning of the work of Mies who, interpreting the sense of a time decidedly included within a fideistic acceptance of technical progress, transforms into incontrovertible accuracy and skilful architecture.

Every element of its buildings shows its "exactness"; neither an inch less nor one more, a Vitruvian and Albertian exactness. Mies, better than any other, has researched this throughout his life and his works: exactness as an expression of a time, that of modernity, which used every technical means in that direction of research, the technique as a search for an objective reality.

Rossi, "analogously" (non-random term of course) becomes the interpreter of a time that however has now definitely lost confidence in the possibility of technical means and their saving and evocative power. Hiroshima and Nagasaki have already struck a blow to confidence in the technical progress and the saving power of the machine in the modern era, these two symbolic events are the collapse of the myth of the technical / machine as Auschwitz, to say it with Adorno, represents the collapse of trust in reason. But he too, with analogous exactitude and post-modern conscience, is looking for an architecture made up of archetypal fragments poetically assembled, starting from a particular affection for the shape of objects. However, this is a "form of things as the last moment of a complex system" (3), again to say it with Adorno, of "a form as sedimented content" and therefore not interpretable in its final outcome, but in its process (theory). If the key to reading Mies's works are his short writings, and even more the discourses and therefore his words, the Scientific Autobiography is the analogue for Rossi, the true theoretical testament of his doing. In the same way that for Mies, observer and in some way "translator" of a modern spirit made of certainties and "great tales", Rossi becomes a lucid interpreter of that impossibility of great tales well described by Lyotard, and precisely admitted by the same: "What could I have aspired to in my work? Certainly not many things, since the great things were precluded"(4). While Mies is interested in an exactness of the whole and of the artifact in its entirety, Rossi rediscovers this exactitude in the replacement by analogy of partial fragments poetically reassembled. The same method therefore, which is what interests me here, but with very different formal outcomes.

Here, with a look at the world outside of me and one at the thought of these two masters, observing the essence of their work and thus bringing architecture back to a collective and not individual "fact". For me, the architectural project has always been a collective and above all a relational act, that is, relating oneself, one's own autobiography with the context, the client, the economic resources, the other actors of the project, in short the more general "matter", in essence to combine (con-fuse) oneself with the spirit of time to rediscover the sense of a more general temporality. Only in this way can architecture and architect be an interpreter of one's own time.



Roma. Villa Quintili. Laboratory. Source by author (2002-2003)

I have always looked for all this in the many project opportunities that I had during the past quarter century and on the occasions (unfortunately limited to the sea of ideas / projects produced) in which I had the opportunity to transform such thoughts into constructed works. I have always imagined that every single project, every built work was a fragment, perhaps even a partial thought, around some cogent questions: the careful use of the ground, the reduction of the necessary space without wasting cubic meters (which cost and invade, I call it "ethics of the metrocube"), the attention to the matter of which architecture is constituted as attention to the context, all filtered through a single theme that for me has always been the search for a zero degree of architecture, an architecture that could be solved in the least possible matter or in the combination (con-fusing) of architecture with the surrounding landscape. This seemed to me the right answer to a hyper-prolific and redundant reality designed and built. Waiting, to put it in Khun's words, a new great paradigm to come, that could give space to new frontiers to reach, not visible at the moment. To better understand this thought, I want to use the words of another landmark and great interpreter of his time, this one outside architecture: Merleau Ponty, who describes this "tension" in his last unfinished work "the philosopher speaks but it is one of his weakness, and an inexplicable weakness: he should be silent, coincide with silence (...) Vice versa everything happens as if he wanted to translate into words a certain silence that is in him and that he listens to. His whole work is in this absurd effort" (5).



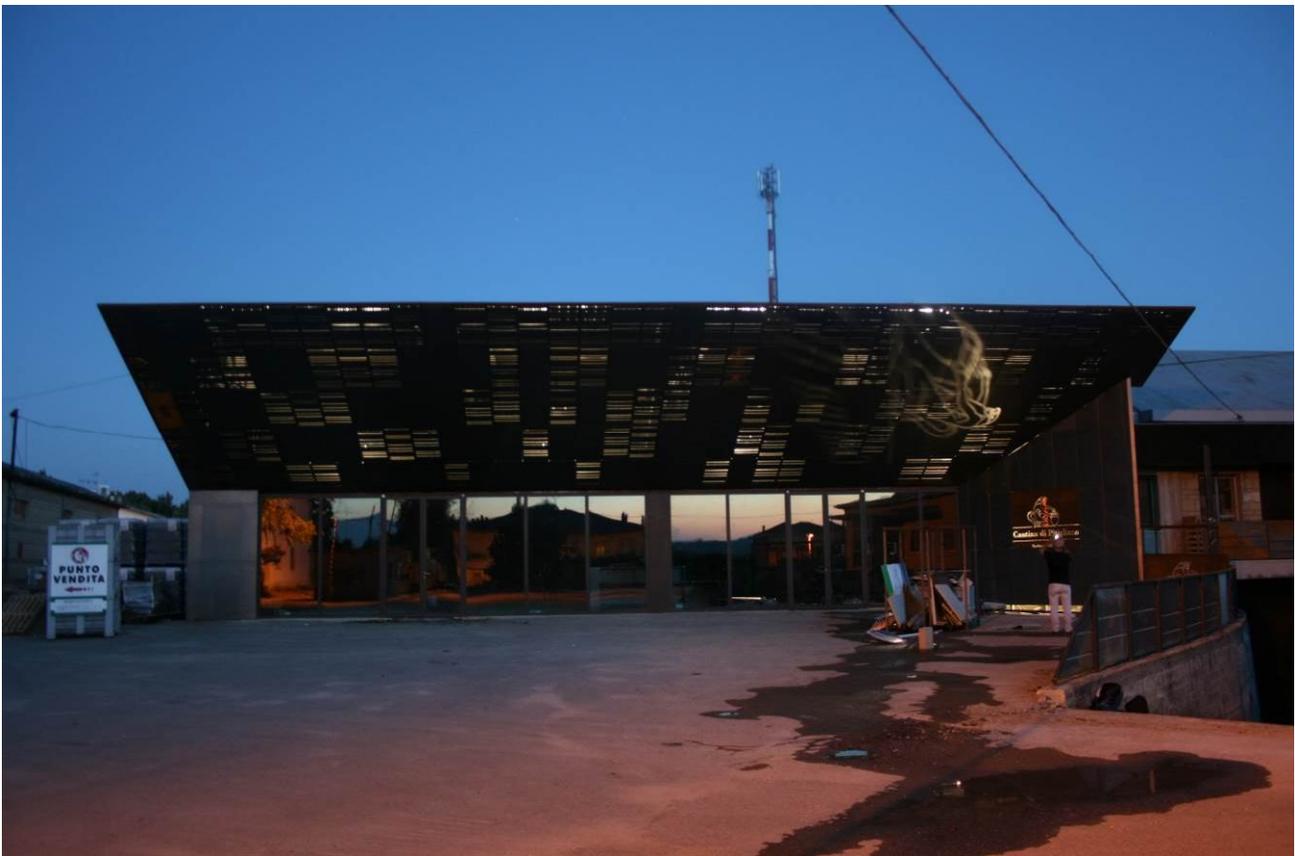
Ferrara, Palazzo Costabile. Restauration and reuse. Photo by Alessandro Ciampi (2001-2003)



Forlimpopoli. Artusi House. Photo by Alessandro Ciampi (2004-2007)



Froissy (France). Archeological Museum, deposit. Photo by Filippo Vinardi (2009-2011)



Pitigliano, social winery. Source by author (present)

I am therefore convinced that the architectural project must today, in a world overexposed to the proliferation of images, now made of versions / interpretations of reality that, by clouding them, transform themselves into reality actually hiding it from true interpretation, returning to its essentiality through removing rather than adding and then try as much as possible to show itself as a discrete gesture that seeks relations with the context, in the above-described meaning, renouncing to one's own self-referentiality intended as affirmation of an individuality that places the subject rather than the object at the center of reflection (a sort of reinterpretation of *neue sachlichkeit* in a contemporary way). This is where the reflection, somehow conclusive, is inserted into the question of the project as a "collective" and not "individual" act. If, as I said before, the architectural project can only be a "relational act", this means that the architect can not put his own and autobiographical will of form in front of what must be a collective process that sees the meeting / clash between one's own autobiography and the conditions of the context (physical, social, cultural, economic, just to mention the main ones). Only in this way can the architect make his architecture adhere to its own time. Impact and confrontation of which Stravinsky was already speaking in 1942: "I feel a kind of terror when, at the time of getting to work and in front of the endless possibilities offered to me, I have the feeling that everything is allowed to me (...) Now in art, as in everything, it is built only on a resistant ground (...). My freedom will be so much greater and deeper the more I limit my field of action, the more numerous the obstacles will surround me."(6) Without this necessary impact, creativity is always groundless.

And finally I conclude my meditation giving reason to the chosen title, which reflects better than any architectural reference the "tension" of these almost 40 years I dedicated to the study and practice of the architectural project:

"I wanted to feel rough and essential  
as the surrounding pebbles,  
eaten by the saltiness;  
timeless splinter, witness  
of a cold will that does not pass.  
Other I was: intent man that observes  
in himself, in others, the boiling  
fleeting life of mankind, late  
to the act, which no one then destroys"(7)



Ermont (France), social cultural center. Photo by Luc Boegly (2011-2013)

## References

- (1) Vitruvio, *De Architectura*, Torino , Einaudi , 1997 Libro I, pag.17
- (2) Here I refer, from now on, to the useful text edited by Vittorio Pizzigoni L.M.V.Der Rohe, *Gli scritti e le opere*.
- (3) A.Rossi, *Autobiografia Scientifica*, Parma Pratiche Ed.
- (4) A. Rossi, *Autobiografia Scientifica*, op. cit., p. 32
- (5) M.M. Ponty, *Il visibile e l'invisibile*, Milano, Bompiani II ed. it,1993, pag.143
- (6) I. Strawinsky, *Poetica della Musica*, Milano Curci, 1983 pagg. 58-59
- (7) E. Montale, *Ossi di Seppia*, Torino, Gobetti, 1925 (free translation by the author)