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ARCHITECTURE AS A SOCIETY AND A FORM OF POWER

Thierry Oppikofer

Fédération Cobaty (France)

Abstract. Architecture is the most profoundly human of disciplines, for it leaves a lasting imprint on the way we live, relate to one another, and perceive the world. Beyond technical requirements and economic imperatives, it entails a moral and political responsibility. A building is never simply an arrangement of materials; it possesses a form of “soul,” can nurture well-being or generate exclusion, and embodies a particular vision of the common good. In this sense, architecture is nothing less than a philosophy of life.

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The Most Human of Sciences

To speak of architecture in the light of philosophy – or, conversely, of philosophy in the light of architecture – while seeing one’s name associated with those of the most eminent practitioners of the architectural arts, is among the most intimidating of exercises for a layperson, even an ageing one and therefore supposedly endowed with a measure of experience: that “hooded lantern which illuminates only the one who carries it”, as Louis-Ferdinand Céline once wrote.

Yet before affectionately reproaching Professor Boyko Kadinov for having placed me in so formidable a position, a brief exercise in lucidity led me to recognise that I too bear some responsibility for appearing as a rather pretentious autodidact, standing almost unabashedly alongside figures such as Benini and Mestre, who fortunately are also friends.

For more than four decades as a journalist, how many times have I written that architecture belongs neither to its authors, nor to its owners, nor even to its users, but rather to the multitude of men and women who behold it, admire it or criticise it – to citizens, passers-by and all those human beings whose living environment is shaped by architectural works? Did Victor Hugo not declare that, before Gutenberg, “architecture was the principal writing, the universal writing”?

My two terms as President of the International Cobaty Federation, which brings together nearly five thousand professionals representing more than one

hundred and fifty fields of activity, confirmed that every transformation of the landscape through the construction of a building, an infrastructure or any artefact of human ingenuity directly and enduringly influences the way we live, think and inhabit our world. Architects give birth to human experiences and, knowingly or not, influence the functioning of society. An architect is never neutral, even if he or she occasionally believes otherwise. Every work embodies a cultural, political and economic vision and – this is our subject – a philosophy of life, both personal and collective.

Shoe-Box Architecture

In a memorable contribution to *Prestige Immobilier*, which I had the honour of editing, Boyko Kadinov vigorously denounced the strictly utilitarian architecture of our age, which the Bulgarian master calls “shoe-box architecture”. Oscillating between the pursuit of profitability and the desire to simplify the work of developers and contractors, it often disguises itself beneath the language of sobriety and drapes itself in ecological proclamations.

In so doing, architecture distances itself from its art in order to conform to the technical and rational requirements of public – and sometimes private – clients. The construction of flat-roofed parallelepipeds offers a relatively inexpensive means of complying with ever more demanding energy standards, accommodating solar panels and standardising building processes.

The nobility – and the moral responsibility – of the architect are immense. No one truly knows what gives a house, a neighbourhood or even a city its soul. Constrained by a growing accumulation of regulations, architects must avoid both costly eccentricity and the temptations of standardised production.

The Mysterious Quality

Since Christopher Alexander’s *The Timeless Way of Building* (Oxford University Press, 1979), we have known that there exists a “quality without a name”: the elusive quality that gives a building its soul, makes it attractive, pleasant to inhabit and stimulating to behold. This harmony arises neither from views, decoration nor furniture. It stems from something more mysterious: a quality that encourages encounters and creates human synergies.

One of my friends, the Neuchâtel architect Marco Ryter, designer of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office building and neighbouring housing projects, established a regular presence on site in order to listen to residents and users. His practice, Bauart Architects, even created a strategic advisory board composed of external personalities – including a real-estate specialist, a game designer and a politician – to enrich and challenge architectural reflection.

Such an approach demonstrates that every architectural gesture affirms a conception of life and is therefore profoundly philosophical, ethical and human.

Let Us Hang No One!

Another friend of mine, Philippe Trétiack, published in 2014 a fascinating book entitled *Should Architects Be Hanged?* (Le Seuil, 2015). The title is obviously ironic. The real question he raises concerns responsibility for the ugliness of certain parts of our cities. Trétiack recalls how every form of power, from the Egyptian pharaohs to contemporary political leaders, has used architecture to secure its posterity. From Khufu to François

Mitterrand, one finds, in essence, the same pyramid – whether at Giza or at the Louvre. Like many thinkers before and after him, Trétiack reminds us that the urban environment shapes our ways of life and that architectural and urban decisions constitute a form of “silent political action”. Beauty, elegance and harmony, once treasured by earlier civilisations, have gradually yielded to efficiency, profitability and convenience. Instead of learning how to think, we increasingly learn how to produce measurable outcomes. We are all responsible for the directions taken by our societies and for the appearance of our cities.

Resistances

The world of architecture is increasingly constrained by norms and technical requirements. Certain more or less solitary ‘geniuses’ succeed in producing memorable architectural works, yet neglect the user (uniformly black interior volumes), the engineer’s recommendations (thermal bridges, maintenance difficulties), the requirements of urban integration and heritage preservation (modern excrescences disfiguring a historic building rather than ennobling it), as well as budgets and deadlines (cost overruns that have ruined certain local authorities). Some readers will undoubtedly recognise a celebrated French architect who combines all these characteristics and, to these, has even added one or two bankruptcies resulting from the hazardous management of his own practice. Others, however – among them Rudy Ricciotti, Christian de Portzamparc and Dominique Perrault – have succeeded in reconciling audacity, originality and aesthetic ambition with respect for regulations, places and human beings.

For Trétiack, the solution lies in a democratisation of architecture and urban planning. This does not imply systematic obstruction through petitions and protests, but rather a more intelligent and constructive participation in public debates and inquiries. Democratic tools and the circulation of information make such engagement possible.

The Common Good

“No law and no action that does not seek above all to promote friendship among human beings can be legitimate.” This reflection by Cicero, which I quoted during the Vizar Architecture Competition in Sofia in 2018, remains strikingly relevant.

A building – whether residential, administrative, commercial or institutional – is not merely an assemblage of materials. Its “quality without a name”, its soul, contributes to well-being and perhaps even to happiness itself. Does friendship among human beings arise, as Vitruvius seemed to believe, from principles such as the golden ratio and proportions inspired by the human body? Does the Vitruvian triad – firmitas, utilitas and venustas (strength, utility and beauty) – not correspond remarkably well to today’s aspiration for cities that are diverse, desirable, dense and sustainable?

Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, the father of architecture in the first century BC and an inspiration to Emperor Augustus, believed that a good architect should first and foremost be a universal mind, endowed with technical knowledge as well as philosophical understanding.

Architecture, described by Victor Hugo as “the great book of humanity”, by Frank Lloyd Wright as something that “derives naturally from life”, and by Goethe as “frozen music”, demands great qualities from its practitioners. These qualities have changed little throughout history and there is no reason to think they will change in the future.

Architecture is a philosophy of life and beauty – almost a universal religion. Let us not allow a purely materialistic vision of the world to impose its impoverished rules upon it.

✉ **Thierry Oppikofer**

Honorary President, Fédération Cobaty (Paris)
Member of Parliament (Geneva)