

Today I would like to try to give answer, for me and for you, to a question. Does European architecture identity exist, and is it important for us today?

And if this European architectural identity exists, is it truly in crisis? That is in transition from one state to another, and the result is, for some of us, peculiarly uncomfortable, while others might see it as liberating and open to a future full of positive opportunities?

We might also consider that the identity of architecture, if it exists, is such that it needs no qualifying adjective. We can think it has an identity within itself, and so this process which we are living through today (an abandoning of distinctions) cannot influence a discipline which is thought of as autonomous and universal. We must, however, recognise that this viewpoint is particularly European, and that for non-European populations, architecture has an entirely different meaning.

Among the six divine couples, as described by Pausanian, which were sculpted by Pheidias on the pedestal of his great statue of Zeus at Olympia, we should note the Hermes-Hestia pair: Hermes, the messenger, who represents passage and change; while Hestia represents the circular hearth in its fixed position, suggesting stability and permanence.

This duality which remains constant throughout the ages is probably one of the traces of how space was conceived in public and private culture, first in Mycenaean-Greek society, then in European society. It is also one of the reasons why in European culture there are frequent variations of language, style and morphology. Along with this duality an awareness germinates and takes root, of the interconnection between social transformations and the shape of things, or rather of the shape of judgement as the shape of things.

When we ask the question, What is Europe today, or What will Europe be tomorrow, we must first of all ask how Europe became what it is today. This is not a question of fatalism, or of the fetters of tradition, or of "the destiny of history", but simply an awareness of the ground on which the present state of things has its foundation, a taking upon oneself of the fullest possible responsibility for that state of things, and a starting-point for all of the adventures of the future.

Of course, an inquiry into European architectural culture could also take us into a much more distant and diverse territory than one seeking independent characteristics of our identity.

When Nikolaus Pevsner published *An Outline of European Architecture*, he was far from giving a definition of European architecture, being well aware that there is no single style in Europe, no recognisable unifying language, not even a common building technique. To describe it, one would have to go far beyond the geographical boundaries of Europe itself, as we conceive of them today, as far afield as the

world of Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Egypt and the Arab Mediterranean; towards the East, should define the uncertain geographical and cultural borders of Europe, one should compare and pursue distant and prehistoric influences.

The identity of Europe has consisted precisely in the capacity to accept and absorb these rich influences, transforming them into its own cultural material, and using them for its own cultural development.

This does not absolve Europeans from their responsibility for having destroyed whole civilizations, both with the force of arms and by religious conversion; but it is Europe's character not to close up in its own identity, but to move towards that which is different, making it its own, and then giving it back as universal, because the greatest cultural asset of Europe is its sense of universality of thought. The crisis of European science and arts arose not from the failure of universalism but from its success, extended to the mass society.

We might, to define European culture, take up Diderot's hypothesis of the 'manifold unity', and use the metaphor of an archipelago: a plurality defined by differences and particularities, with multiple centres, whose only action, therefore, is the variation.

But how can these differences and particularities have a future? How can the European culture of today retain its capacity to become universal when faced with present mass global uniformity that extends beyond the individual geopolitical identities of all continents?

Wouldn't it be better to surrender, and look solely to the common, world-wide elements: technology, the processes of internationalisation of finance and production, information and market as new forms of universality? Or, on the contrary, is it better to reflect again on the origin of European culture, to retrace its foundations and the path of its development through the ages, and compare our future with it?

In terms of ethnicity, it may be said that Europe is not only a continent with uncertain geographical boundaries, but also the result of a complex superimposition of various peoples; and of course, of growing immigration in our own times. In the next century Europe will certainly become multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan. It may be said that the word Europe has, for many centuries, referred to different places. On one question, many geographers are in agreement: Europe is not a continent, but a cultural entity. We may say, with some schematic simplification, that this cultural entity first identifies with that of Greece, then with that of the Roman empire, following which, there comes a layer of Christian culture, and finally that of secularised rationalism.

So far as the image of Europe in the eyes of Europeans themselves is concerned, after the 16th century, there is a consolidation of the idea of nation, though the tendency towards larger political entities can be traced back as far as the crisis of feu-

dalism following the Black Death of 1348. The idea of nation comes late in European history, and was built and reinforced through political and often artificial will. Moreover, today there are ethnic groups with no state, and states which refer to more than one ethnic group.

European intellectual culture, on the other hand, has always had an international character. The use of Latin as the learned language of sciences lasted at least until the end of the 17th century.

The transplanting of ideas, and their reinterpretation and adaptation, in the light of local realities, therefore seems to be a permanent feature of European culture. The Greeks landed in southern Italy and founded a civilisation there; the great mediaeval architects of Europe travelled working in England and in France, and from France to Hungary or Switzerland. Guarini built in Lisbon, Quarenghi in Saint Petersburg, Pollack in Italy and it is the same for painters and musicians. The examples are so many they become commonplace. And this is only one aspect of the circulation of European culture: the first centuries of this millennium saw students – and teachers – wandering from one university to another: Paris, Padua, Cracow, Oxford, Coimbra, Bologna, Prague. But European intellectuals and artists also travelled outside the circuit of universities, courts and religious pilgrimages; they met and discussed, they influenced each other. The high-cultured man, as early as the 16th century, thus headed for Rome, Paestum or Greece to rediscover classical art.

Europeans, moreover, have tenaciously and widely transformed the physical aspect of their territory over the centuries for agricultural use and settlement. Europeans have also sought, by means of the garden, to unite refinement of agrarian culture with well defined aesthetic space, proposing a Nature of greater perfection, or imposing upon Nature their own vision of regularity.

Certainly, as we travel across national borders in Europe, from France to Germany, from Italy to Austria, from Belgium to Holland, there is no change in density of urban settlement. We encounter every few kilometres cities, large and small, each with its own identity founded on its particular structure of squares, streets, churches, town halls, arcades, monuments, and remains of antiquity.

In comparison with other continents, the density and variety of the European urban network give people the opportunity for direct experience, a sense of belonging to a particular place, and, at the same time, a sense of variety of character.

Around the idea of the city, the Europeans developed not only a practical experience in land use, but a permanence of settlement traces on which to rebuild for centuries, and also an idea of the city, indeed a theory of the city and architecture, of its way of representing the symbols of its own social organisation and of its convictions or ideals.

European architecture, as I said, has no unity of language or of style. This does not mean that we can in some easy way rid ourselves of the problem of style and language. Even if it is only through the internal dynamic of the questions of form that art suggest possible transformation of experience, that experience is the material and the terrain with which art can move itself.

Therefore the progressive impoverishment of experience, which is typical of our times, the progress of its increasing passage through the global media, masses of information leading every which way, technical complexity which divorces human acts from their consequences, all this causes difficulties, to the point of view of art and, within it, of architecture.

In the grips of this contradiction, it now seems that art is seeking to coincide with the present state of the unreality of experience. This would lay the foundations for a total conversion of all reality and contradiction into an aesthetic event; and the result is a style more inflexible than any other.

But we could try to retrace the specific features of this phase of the crisis and change in European architecture, instead of starting with the question of form and style, by considering the change in practice and in the working conditions of today, the progressive change of the profession of the architect in marketing activities or in service companies.

There still remains the far more meaningful task of seeking the characteristics of the identity of European architecture by understanding the architecture of today as the way in which the original meaning of what we call architecture, appears here and now, the meaning of that activity which has been handed down over the centuries, which never ceases to be reshaped and transformed, but which we recognise as architecture throughout the passing of centuries: architecture as an "ergon poetikon".

But we might also think of the identity of European architecture in terms of its ancient capacity to understand diversity, in the tradition of Cicero's "dissimili scribendi genere", which requires that these diversities be looked at as relative to a historical perspective, antifundamentalist; a culture capable, above all else, of managing distinctions within its own culture, distinctions such as identity of places and traditions.

Once more, there is the dialectic between permanence and change which I mentioned at the outset, in which fundamentals re-emerge constantly in new forms under new historic and social conditions, as well as in new conditions for the practice of art.

Manfredo Tafuri, discussing the *De re aedificatoria* by Leon Battista Alberti, writes of the flexibility shown in the face of the various "uses" of the idea of classicism: "In this way a linguistic pluralism coexists with the idea of a rule ... The whole of humanist architecture expresses a courageous and refined bal-

ance between the search for the fundamental and experimental. The principal tool of innovation is a minimal necessary transgression, with the aim of keeping two opposing poles united: the one based on stable foundations, and the other re-creating itself in the subjective will", which interprets the conditions under which emerge the fundamental.

European architecture is, in any case, the architecture of distinction, above all the distinction of figurative shapes as the foundation of their necessary relationship. The parts which make up the figures are organised by means of their own commensurability (Vitruvius' *commodulatio*): the parts themselves, one in connection with the other, and in connection with the whole. This is the foundation of the rules which lead not only to harmonious work, not only to its proper structure, but to its universality.

It was European art which conceived the idea of space as figurative organisation in order to define the various rules of representation; a definition of space as an essential element of figuration and of the tectonic of the connected elements.

The great architectural complexes of Europe are exemplary in the way they demonstrate the importance of a specific connection with the land, a particular way of making contact with terrain and organising it as an architectural principle. It is this "principle of settlement" which can connect architectural artefact with urban system; a relationship that has always been strictly enforced in European culture.

In addition to that, "one of the essential characters of the European spirit," writes Fritz Saxl, "seems to be the way in which it destroys things and re-builds them on new bases, breaking with tradition only to return to it in a completely new spirit." The theme of continual "renaissances," (which clearly applies not only to the classical Renaissance,) is the thread from which the history of European architecture is woven.

Our culture has accustomed us to find it entirely natural that one single building may contain within itself parts built at successive times, even centuries apart. The idea of modernism itself promotes the linguistic tools of *collage* and *bricolage*, as a form of revisiting reality by modifying one's view of it.

Modernism was born of the desire to break with the past, not so much as a form of liberation from traditions, but as a radical re-examination of the past. The very will to break could not avoid the consideration of the past as the main interlocutor of the New. It is the new act which reveals the past to the conscience.

But over the course of a century the New itself has become in turn 'tradition'. On the one hand, it has found its place in European history, and on the other, it has become a reflection of its own history and its various components have turned it into design materials, in an eclecticism of its own language. It is not without significance, therefore, that this dis-

cussion about the identity of European architecture is taking place at the close of this century. The crisis we are speaking, as far as architecture is concerned, must be ascribed for a large part to the deformation of the European idea of modernity from the moment it betrays its own field of ideals and conflict: when modernism ceases to be critical, and becomes instead organic with respect to social organisation.

It is only when the field of action of modern architecture is squeezed into a purely aesthetic or practical interpretation, giving up critical distance with respect to social conditions that it became subjected to the market, becoming entirely ornamental, and at the same time, forcing its own expulsion from its tectonic tradition.

When architecture opens itself up to the everyday aesthetics of the media, it opens itself up to an endless series of inessential gestures; that is, it breaks not only with its capacity to dissent, but with its own ontology.

There is no doubt that the very idea of European architecture, of its existence and hence of the identity of its tradition, is a preoccupation which today is the object of neglect, or even more often of aversion. The cultural models of the younger generations look to global internationalism as a form of liberation through placelessness, to mobility and flexibility as a way out of all rules, which are seen only as restrictions. This may all be perceived as an exciting situation, of encounters, opportunities, as a drive towards the future, the horizon over which unexpected changes will take place. But all the same, it is necessary to admit that the rule-breaking behaviour has become mere harmless uniformity rather than confrontation or debate; and it is this above all which contributes to wasting much of the energy which this process liberates.

All information is considered on a single level, that of its ownership and marketability, regardless of its depth and of its importance. History is projected only onto the plane of a storehouse of shapes and styles, or rather it is considered an impediment to personal freedom, a freedom which today frequently clashes with any form of collective liberation. The de-socialization caused by mass culture means that we live together only to the extent that we all use the same products, and listen to the same information; we interpersonally communicate for the exchange of common goods while being rather intent on erasing all stratification from our cultural identity. We live together only at the price of losing our identity.

We have entered, after the post-industrial society, into a post-critical society. There is nothing left to "start a discussion", with no more rules to break; perhaps the reconstruction of rules might be a subject for discussion, but this would quickly raise a storm of protest from the representatives of vulgar pluralism and the champion of "freedom of aesthetic



expression". It is to this that the uniform neo-eclecticism of our age, makes its appeal.

There are those who feel that eclecticism, as a supermarket of the ideas in which we are immersed, is nothing other than today's version of the ideas of freedom of personal opinion which are in the finest European tradition. The problem is not to put aside the contradictions which arise out of such an ideologically anti-ideological state, to put every aim, every principle and every method on the same level of value.

On the one hand behaviour, values, and information have become homogeneous global models, beyond any specific reference; on the other, their time-scale of change has modelled itself on the fast pace of economy, in contrast to the long periods required for the construction of territories and cities.

To have its roots in the absence of place therefore seems to be a destiny for the global version of modernism. But the idea of "ubiquity" and flexibility takes its meaning from the fact that fixed points exist. Rediscover in what way might it be possible to reacquire the habit of unhurried action; in what way might the subject be able to reconstruct the necessary bridge between the instrumental universe and social and cultural identity; and in what way might the ethical content of modernism be intensified: these are some of the fundamental questions for the survival of European culture, and within it of European architecture, as well as for its capacity to resist all forms of colonisation, including the "colonisation of its own future", to use the splendid expression of Octavio Paz.

The main content of any work of today architecture seems to try to express an incomplete flux, a sort of imitation of life, rather than a lesson on destiny, a lesson which would open to all other forms of interrogation, but starting from the centre of our discipline, of our cultural identity, and of a specific work. On the contrary to move backwards into the future seems to have become the destiny of the architecture of today.

Many architects today, still uncertain whether to embrace the despotism of science or the tyranny of the majority, are busying themselves with demolishing the structural foundations of our discipline, seeking to use the dispersed congestion of shapes to cover the traces of any reasoning behind the constitution of their work.

They seem to express the wind of uncertainty of our times: but it is only the wind of a feeble fan, rather than the blast that caught up Benjamin's angel of history. In reality, the architectural portrait of the new condition of globalisation is limited to describing and extolling the aspects of present ideas of the majority.

In spite of these critiques, or rather, because of them, I believe that a central problem of European architecture in our time is the need to be aware of

the different material of this new situation, and to deal with it as Europeans.

In the first place, we need to turn the elements of that crisis into material capable of restoring a difference that allows a dialogue between things and people; we need to promote a situation in which every end reveals its own foundation, that is, its own possible path in the specific situation.

Secondly, it is necessary to reveal the foundations as a confrontation here and now with the situations and the questions raised by the places and by contemporary history.

Third, we must try to restore in our activity these practical virtues which, though forgotten or misconceived, form the specific terrain of the discipline of European architecture.

I often like to say that order, simplicity, precision and organic unity are virtues which are forgotten today but which are what make up the artistic practice of European architecture of the "longue durée" – to use a famous expression of Braudel, whose characteristics and transitions I first set out to describe.

Simplicity, of course, as the maximum economy of means of expression. That is in these days the result of finding a way through complexity, and cannot be the result of simplification. Precision is the ability to see detail between things, and not solely a technical skill. Organic unity is, above all else, faithful to the rules of the specific work. Order needs to become the ability to turn restlessness and opportunity into a hypothesis of form: order is the very shape of things, the way they are for us, for our perceptions and interpretations.

To endure, to construct for future centuries something that stimulates questions about their past and provides a field for their present activity; becoming collective memory, "monumentum", something worthy to be shown and re-examined anew; all this must become once again the common will of European architecture.

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