

A moral issue

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Keywords: CIAM, Torre Velasca, morality, form, Ernesto Rogers, Peter Smithson

ABSTRACT

The Torre Velasca (1958), a high-rise building located in Milan and developed by the Italian architectural firm BBPR, was presented by Ernesto Rogers, one of the firm partners, at CIAM 59' celebrated at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, The Netherlands. The building became the centre of an international debate between Rogers and the English architect Peter Smithson, a discussion concerning the continuation of the project of modernity in architecture. The article, through a precise recreation of the discussion, demonstrates even though the architects preoccupations differ, they find a common ground in the question of architectural form.

Not too long ago, discussions between architects were important – and not exclusively to architects. In 1959 the Italian Ernesto Rogers and the Englishman Peter Smithson held a dialogue which stands for what Anthony Vidler, in a recent article, defined as “the great divide” in architectural theory, that is, architecture torn between science and history (Vidler, 2012). But because this discussion was not as straightforward as to be easily polarised, it needs to be

selectively recreated in order to allow common issues to emerge, because after it – and once the congress was over – the general mood was one of disparity and misunderstanding. As Rogers so eloquently poses in an editorial published in October, one month after the meeting in Otterlo: “I have never seen a case in which ideological and temperamental disparity was so great that it was impossible even to attempt a provisional synthesis from which a new dynamics of common strength might spring” (1959a, p. VII). Although we need to agree with Rogers that out of the dialogue there was no longer a sense of community between the participants of the congress (and the evidence of this is that the congresses no longer continued), under all the nuances and complexities of this dialogue lays blatantly the question of architectural form. To be fair though the word “form” was rarely used (once or twice by Smithson and Rogers), but its ghost is there all along, with its problematic yet inevitable presence.

But the discussion between Rogers and Smithson follows up from a different, but closely related, exchange of opinions held earlier the same year. It was April when the English historian and critic Reyner Banham published an article in the *Architectural Review* arguing that Italian architecture was going under an infantile regression, abandoning the technological aesthetic of modernity for a revival of the *Stile Liberty*, a form of Italian Art Nouveau (1959, p. 232). For this attack against modernity, he blamed a group of young architects based in Turin and Milan whom he came to know through publications of their work on *Casabella Continuità*, edited by Ernesto Rogers. Two months later,

Banham received a strong response from Italy in the form of an editorial article in the same publication. Rogers argued that in fact, the infantile regressions accused by Banham were attempts of those Italian architects to experiment for “the possibility of re-launching modern architecture” (1959b, p. 303), to reformulate the framework in which a modern architecture – in continuity with the work of the masters – could engage with its surroundings, what he termed as its “preesistenza ambientali.”

What was to happen later that year, during the CIAM 59' reunion in Otterlo between Rogers and Peter Smithson, was no surprise. Banham and Smithson did not only share a common cultural background, they also shared an intellectual affinity, finding a common place in the question about the direction of modern architectural discourse. This exchange is worth analysing in detail because the arguments expressed in the reunion were articulated around a particular building: BBPR's Torre Velasca, a paradigmatic and controversial high-rise building in Milan erected on a bombed site, in the crossing of Corso de Porta Romana and Piazza Velasca.

In Otterlo, Rogers presented his project to the congress by describing it in a very technical way, as he put it. He started by telling the audience that the height of the tower was a direct consequence of the by-law building in Milan, which dictated that any new construction was not to surpass the peak of the *Madonnina* that stands at the top of the *Duomo*. As consequence, the Torre Velasca is a building of one hundred and six meters of height⁽¹⁾.

According to its architect, the general shape of the building, despite of what the majority of the critics at the time believed, was a “very rational design approach” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 92). Therefore, the similarity of its shape to that of a medieval tower was, according to Rogers, the result of the best distribution of a programme that had to mix, in the same built mass, offices and dwellings. Rogers further justifies all the fundamental aspects of the tower through his rational narrative: figure, structure, material, colour, facilities and interiors, arguing that it was important to speak technically “because technique requires precise decisions, and not only theoretical ones, whereas aesthetics can be either communicative or not” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 93). The tone of the description seems to have been strategically chosen to make clear to the critics that accused him of emulating a medieval tower, that the shape of the building is no result of a “tradition of forms”, as he explains:

“During the Middle Ages it became necessary to conquer the sky because the space within the fortified walls of the city was limited; [...] In order to maintain suitable large living area, the upper floors of dwellings were cantilevered over the streets below. It can be seen then, that it is only by coincidence that our building is similar to a medieval tower; a similarity that arose from the same needs, but for different things”. (As cited in Newman, 1961, p. 92)

But regardless of what Rogers said, for Smithson and others, the shape of the tower had more meaningful things to say than its architect, and therefore, it was impossible in their eyes that the

figure of the Torre Velasca was a mere coincidence, as it was later stated by Smithson in the discussion. Defending his position, Rogers proposes that their main objective “was to give this building the intimate value of our culture – the essence of history” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 93). And it is on basis of these ineffable explanations that Smithson finds ground to determine that the Torre Velasca was “a bad model to give because there are things that can be so easily distorted and become not only ethically wrong but also aesthetically wrong” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 95).

Rogers’ response to such accusations – the Torre Velasca as an unethical model – accepts at least that the decisions within a project should always be of a moral nature: “our acts are objects and very important objects in the very call of life. Therefore, what we do can be for the good or for the bad” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 95), he says, in a yet ineffable tone. But Rogers makes clear that for the architect, morality resides in “the consistency of his thinking and actions (...) in the way of doing a thing; in the way of realizing how to do your job, and what your object is – the intimate morality of your object” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 95).

To give the Torre Velasca the “essence of history” was, then, Rogers’ moral obligation, the role of history being his most urgent concern. “The life of man in his conscious perception, that is, in his use of life, therefore in his customs,” is his definition of history, and in relation to it, architecture is the representation of “this use of life, this custom in a specific and completely extrinsic way, in a way where

all is expressed and realized” (Rogers & Semerini, 1999, p. 59). History, for Rogers, is the result of a continuous succession of present times. In this take on history, there are no gaps that define one present from the other, time is inevitable continuous, and so the alleged “break from the past” motto of modern architecture was, for him, another form of historical continuity.

But this “sense of history” puts architecture in a comfortable position. Due to the inevitable continuum of history, architectural form has little chance to be considered revolutionary or even reformatory, both within and outside the discipline. Rogers’ moral issue lies in the hand of the architect, in this case, to be able to transmit through his work what is the contemporaneous in contemporary culture, validated by the immediate past, or in Rogers’s terms: the truthful structure of the previous present. In this sense, what Rogers wanted his critics to see in the Torre Velasca, was the concept of the building, “a fundamental moral, and aesthetic thought” (Newman, 1961, p. 96), translated into a precise architectural form – which, amusingly enough, happened to look like a medieval tower.

Smithson resisted to believe Rogers, the tower for him does not reflect a method of arriving to a building “but actually represents a formal plastic vocabulary” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 97), and while he agrees that the “programme led to the definition of the basic parts of the building”, all the other aspects of it were a result of a “self-contained formal system” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 97). For Smithson this building completely fails in establishing continuity with its surroundings, which had no implications

beyond itself, considering it “an ultimate statement, a solution offered in a closed aesthetic” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 96). This added another dimension to the discussion; what could be seen as an “open Aesthetic” is the living extension of Functionalism” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 96), argues Smithson, therefore a truthful expression of modernity, whereas “in a closed aesthetic, function is no more than the handmaid of form” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 96), that is, formalism exercised as style. And this closed aesthetic, which for Smithson the Torre Velasca is an example of, was inevitable doomed to strategically recall forms of the past:

“One cannot help associating this particular form of a closed building with a society of 1910. It is from that society which we are now in the most active evolution. I feel that the only model one can accept as being moral is one in which the possibility of a liberation towards an open society finds its expression.” (As cited in Newman, 1961, p. 97)

But what did Smithson meant for an “open aesthetic”? What Smithson was implying with the term was both the acceptable degree of transparency of the architectural object – between idea and form – and the notion that architecture should be informed by laws that resides outside itself, or as he explains it:


“Open Aesthetic” is a strict reciprocation of a situation as it reveals itself, with all its certainties and doubts. This architecture has no consonants of its own, its links with the past are as casual as are those of the people who will use its buildings, and it has to be

used because only then in movement and change can its sequences of form, its implications beyond its physical limits, become apparent”. (As cited in Newman, 1961, p. 96)

It is clear that, if for Rogers the good architect should intend to transmit history through the building, for Smithson it was the very building that becomes either a good or a bad model for the present and future. In Smithson’s view, not only it was not tolerable anymore to take an anti-historical position in architecture, as Rogers was proposing, but it was also necessary (and perhaps more importantly) to take up a moral and artistic one. A responsible architecture should include the “social agenda of class mobility and personal freedom” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 96), and when Smithson said responsibility and morality in architecture, he meant it in a very tangible way. With this approach, whatever architecture stood for, should clearly, almost pedagogically, be expressed through form. The operative role of architectural form is, in Smithson’s view, to set up a model were “the nature of history, the nature of society as it is today” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 96) would find its expression through architecture.

Whether a product of an open or a close aesthetic, moral or immoral, the resolution of the conflict may never come. Clues of an understanding might have been provided by the Tower itself, if not for the fact that buildings do not have a voice of their own. This fact is evident, when Rogers presented the “physical evidence” of the tower to the congress; it was inevitable that misunderstandings would arise, as the say goes “modernity lies in the eye of the beholder”, and in this

case, that is the closest to a resolution that we may have. For the truth is that both architects were trying to continue the seminal project of modernity, but only different aspects of it, as it is clear when Rogers, responding to Smithson accusations, argues that it is impossible to demonstrate that the Torre Velasca belonged to a “closed aesthetic” just by a formal analysis. And in turn, Rogers’ take on modernity was found in its technical systems “such as some of Mies van der Rohe’s examples, in which the structure is separated from the building allowing complete flexibility in the interior” (as cited in Newman, 1961, p. 96).

Whether means or end, architectural form is central to the polemics. “Form”, in its superficial meaning of “shape”, serves as the ultimate evidence, the object that validated Rogers’ discourse, and in its profound meaning, as the discursive device that allowed for the articulation of non-architectural themes such as history and mobility around a high-rise building. 

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NOTES

- (1) Note from the editor: La Madonnina, located on the main spire of the Duomo in 1774, is 108,5 meters above the ground. Sources: www.duomomilano.it and www.it.wikipedia.org.