

# Architecture and its image

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## Premise

*The ambiguous relationship created between the architectural work and its image would not interest us as a mere theoretical question if it did not have to do with the way in which architecture contributes, at all levels, reproducing itself, to give form to the environment we live in. In the transfer between the conception of a building (public, private, celebrative or functional), its realisation and diffusion through replicas, imitations and declinations, it is transferred not only to the specific tuning of the architectural art, but also to the way in which places interact with people creating values that deeply influence our quality of living.*

*Seen from this point of view, the relationship between architecture and image is linked to a range of questions that come from the internal dynamics of the artistic production in order to approach those of social living.*

*This essay discusses this aspect in a particular way, starting from the hypothesis that a congenital specificity implied in the architecture-image relationship that, in other times contributed to the spreading of values of this artistic discipline in the world, is now a cause of distortions whose repercussions affect our way of living and debate the very need of architecture in the present world.*

## *The weight of the images, the degradation of identity*

*In our times, which have given images a foreground place and constantly regret the parallel weakness of the multiple identities affecting man's life, it would seem possible to identify a direct relationship between the strengthening of some and the dispersion of others. Actually, things are not exactly like this, both ambits (image and identity) are joined by many links, so much so that even the diffusion of images constitutes one of the most evident expressions of the contemporary identity in each sector.*

*However, there are evident consequences of this relationship that involve some areas (like architecture, the city and the landscape) in which the progressive growth of the importance of images has a bearing on the dense net of relationships that traditionally determine identity. Consequences that influence directly the way in which forms are reproduced and the values that determine the physical environment where human living takes place, in the way in which appropriation is confirmed and the acknowledgement of a place by those who inhabit or visit it. That is to say, in the way in which the quality of places we live in manifests itself and how this characteristic is perceived.*

*The processes that lead to the formation of universally recognised values (the popularity of a landscape, the character of a city, the importance of a building, and so on) generally need long time and particular conditions to establish themselves.*

*The placing of the image weight and its autonomous conditioning of any other*

*relationship has a strong bearing on this modified mechanism changing its times and modalities transforming other identity constructions.*

*The most evident modification has to do with the weakening of this network of relationships, consolidated for centuries that have contributed to linking the same idea of identity to a multiplicity of factors or places densely linked among them. When each meaning tends to concentrate on the surface of things, it is there where it is easier to catch it or where it seems to coincide with a sole image, it is inevitable for relationships that are no longer required for their traditional capacity to produce identity, to lose their evidence progressively and their need, and be substituted in this role by items of faster consumption.*

*A change of axis and of importance in identity formation is, therefore, determined: a set of related actions is substituted, slowly, by a few attractive and substantially isolated events. In The Image of the City, Kevin Lynch reminds us that, taking the physical environment into consideration, it is never possible to speak of the presence of isolated events since the way in which it is reproduced makes inevitable the creation of links and interactions among all the things that contribute to give it form, even if it is only for the linking role constantly exercised by the people who live in it.*

*Going back to the nature of identity, we can say that it is the result of the never-ending movements developed along a set of routes partly invisible that overlap other concrete ones, following varied trajectories in a certain space and a stretch of time. It is to*

*this sum of routes not always obvious, since most of them are made of ideas, models and conventions, that we owe the transformation of a site into a landscape (that is to say, the change of a fragment of nature like many others, into a concentrate of qualities and values linked by inextricable ties to the life of those who live or have lived in it), or the transformation of a town into a city (that is, from a small group of houses or shops into the greatest machine to multiply symbols and meanings that man has been able to invent). Evolutionary processes flow along these routes, there are non-stop meanings, representations and impressions in a constant bouncing from building to building, from one space to another. Their existence is a guarantee of the survival of a place and the movement animating it implies physical facts, natural events and ideas.*

*When this movement loses strength, when the evident traces of its presence disappear or the relationships become darker, what belongs to the visible world also weakens in its capacity to reflect the values that surround it, amplifying, sometimes in an excessive way, the evidence of its own image. It is then the diverse intensity and the evidence of a moment to be defined what marks the difference between a complex identity and one based exclusively on images. While the first one, in fact, feeds from the movement of its components and from the intensity of its relationships, the second tends to reproduce itself in a substantially static, self-referent and potentially self-destructive system. A proof of this is, in the urban areas, what happens in historic places belonging to the circle of world tourism (from Venice*

*to Granada, from Nimes to Cuzco and many other cities of the world), when an articulated and composed identity makes room for another based on the repetition of fixed or mobile images tending to reconfirm themselves (and to sell themselves) without variations that might disturb universally acquired conventions. This phenomenon has an already long history and produces evident negative effects also through distorted practices of usage conservation in places belonging to the heritage of humanity. The case of other cities, not so well endowed by history, which have commissioned "contemporary monuments" to represent them, is more recent. From Sydney to Bilbao, this has contributed to substituting an articulate but for many reasons considered weak identity, for the image of just one building (Utson's Opera House or Gehry's Guggenheim) which, fulfilling the role of absolute icon, ensures worldwide visibility and mission. In these two cases, shadowed by the continuous movement that makes the city evolve and its own complexity, the attention concentrates on a few events, belonging to the past or to contemporaneity; the non-varied spreading of parts of its own image to consolidate or affirm its own presence in the world. The awful consequences and the immediate advantages of these choices are evident, perhaps the long term risks inserted into a metamorphosis of identity in the process of becoming a mask, are not equally so.*

*Even though this is one of the most evident expressions of the contemporary world and, in a certain way, also of its identity, the prevalence of the image over other components that determine the*

*specificity of a place, of a building or of a territory, is at least a signal, and often the cause, of the progressive delay of the indispensable movement, of that coaction among many facts which gives depth and meaning to things.*

*A trace always remains of the many interrupted routes, of the broken relationships; and this type of "involuntary memory" represents one of the specificities of each place and distinguishes it from the rest. Despite that, the images influence every impression, the tracks of those routes are never totally erased, but they leave evident traces of their existence. They may be more volatile presences, like the ones that link an architecture to those who use them, or more stable presences, like those determined by the responsibilities or the roles assumed by buildings towards the contexts they emerge from. However, their existence is an undebatable detail.*

*What in substance is determined by the prevalence of images over the more complex identity processes is forming a kind of double face which has to do with the physical phenomena we are dealing with, and that accompanies them until an intervention, a project or a plan puts the separate worlds in contact once again, rekindling the spark of the beneficial mutations that preside the process.*

*Absolute images and complex identity participate then of the construction of the physical environment, of the balance, of the distance or of the relationship determined between them, and they have a determining role in the affirmation or not of the quality and difference*

of understanding what should be the heritage of all those who occupy this type of transformations.

### **The life of images**

If what we have just said is true as it refers to the acknowledgement of the contemporary world, the relationship between matter and image presents connotations even different at a particular level of the mechanisms that precede the development of this discipline. The question, in this case, has distant origins. The relationship between constructed and represented form, for example, has always had some particularities related to what happens in other fields.

Unlike painting, for example, that cannot but spread itself by means of the image of works done (paintings, drawings, incisions, and so on), architecture has the possibility of presenting a double face of itself: the one of its acted form or, on the other hand, the one of the project or that one of the idea in its origin. Both faces have always had an autonomous and diverse influence on real places or on cultural sites. It is well known that many architectural projects which have not been built, by means of the diffusion of their drawn images, have been capable of influencing the universe of architecture as much as some of the constructed works and even more. It is enough to think of the set of projects of great works done by Étienne-Louis Boullée when his career as an architect was reaching its end; in the theatres, the cenotaphs, the monuments of various types and in the influence of these on his contemporaries and, more than a century later, on the architects of our time, when the Essay

on the Art of the great French architect, was discovered. Even before Boullée's "architecture of shadows", it had been the Palladian treatise. Its diffusion, in at least a couple of continents, almost always independent from a direct knowledge of the works done by the Vicenzan master<sup>(1)</sup>, has led to the proliferation of thousands of buildings that have spread all over the world an interpretation of classical architecture that, in some cases, has coincided with the same image of some nations in a defined historical period, from the United States of North America to Great Britain.

But, if Palladio, as an architect, has influenced more by the pictures of The four books of architecture than by his works, another great Italian artist, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, can also be included in this family of diffusors of architectural images. His "portraits" of buildings in ruins, remainders of a past civilization (but in which the eyes of the visionary artist saw future revealed) have in fact influenced architects all over the world even though he himself built very little.

What we can define as the "autonomous power" of the drawings has continued manifesting itself in succeeding epochs. Among the many cases of image influence on complete difficulties is the project for the mausoleum of Frederick the Great conceived by a very young Friedrich Gilly that, even though it was never built and having been the expression of an architect who had no time to reach old age, convinced other artists of the quality of Friedrich Schinkel and Leo von Klenze to dedicate themselves to architecture, thus conditioning the development of 19th Century architecture.

In the 1900s, cases multiply. From the drawings of the constructivists to the city of Tony Garnier and the drawings of the Voisin Plan of a much older Le Corbusier than the young German architect, influencing not only the architects and urbanists of the century, but also those who actually built cities and found that those simplified forms, declined in a trivial way, could offer a new earning opportunity.

There are drawings that, for some architects, have represented the only occasion to go down in history. Few remember, for example, from the vast production of Ludwig Hilberseimer, more than the wonderful urban perspectives representing a city still to come today. Those drawings, even though they were not produced by the hands of their author, have influenced American and European architects, even indirectly determining the aspect of complete urban areas. But examples of this type which can support the "autonomous" influence of the drawn architectural image on the real world are innumerable.

On the other hand, constructed architecture, too, at least since the arrival of the first publications that have spread the photographic image, has always been characterized by a twofold level of communication: direct, determined by visits to buildings, cities and monuments, practicing in the course of travels always less Grand Tour and more photographic safari; and mediated, represented by publications. These, for a time exclusively on paper and today above all on-line, offer an autonomous point of view in the representation of an architectural work, expressed by

photographers always more specialized that have managed to generate a true style, made of particular shots, with a certain way to use the colour, and so on, cultivated and perpetuated in time by graphic specialists and writers.

On the way between the direct knowledge of a work and the mediated offer proposed by its photographic image, many things happen. Many times, as it happens with models in the world of fashion, the work is subject to a real make-up intervention, to eliminate flaws, or to contextual modifications that artificially transform the natural environment or the human presence with exclusions and insertions.

Architects, obsessed by the decadence of buildings derived from use or carelessness, and always concerned about the untidy context that "upsets" their works, have found in Photoshop a solution to remove them from too narrow contact with time and space, and prepare the "book" of their own works or the website of their studies like a gallery of patinated portraits. Here, the presentations appear ageless and placeless, and they restore the idea of a catalogue that the customer, the writer of a magazine or the student can resort to, contributing to stress the trend to isolate the buildings presented and make replicating easier. On the other hand, photography acrobatics and the use of the zoom or the wide angle lens or the view from above, very often make live, on paper or digital version, relationships that nobody in real life could ever recognize and that, in fact, do not exist but in virtual images.

It could be said that the life of images no longer coincides with that of buildings nor with the one of forms and each influences the observer in a different way. It is a well known fact that a look at Frank Lloyd Wright's "Fallingwater", in black and white, taken from a certain point of view, even giving a partial image of the work, has influenced millions of "country" replicas in every corner of the earth. However, the phenomenon has nowadays intensified by mediatic explosion and there are more buildings that, from the project phase, clearly want to replicate not so much a real building but its image or part of its image influenced by pages of a publication on the subject of by television recordings. With this, the direct attraction of a certain architecture or its designs, ends up being superfluous by the study of its characteristics and by its slow understanding as the necessary novelty of a new piece of work. In other words, in a world highly dominated by image, architectural reality takes on the peculiar characters of an image losing its own.

What at a certain time produced images, becomes the product of images. Let us think of architectures that seem projected more to stress and guarantee their photogenic character in the self-referential world of international publications, than to respond to specific functions in specific places; buildings that end up assuming, even because of this, the lack of depth and the declared eradication of an image. It is evident that all of this guarantees architecture a massive visibility never seen before and promotes architects in a system of stars similar to that existing in the world of cinema. But, at the same time, undoubtedly, products of this new

condition seem subject to inexorable rules being no longer generated, at popular or cult level, by that process of slow transformation which characterized the progress of architecture centuries ago. The best architectural fruits of the image kingdom cannot, in fact, prevent their bright skins from letting a macabre fixation be seen. Architecture-image, even the one reproduced in movement by cinematographic media, cannot have the dynamicity of those buildings which try to respond to real life by giving it a possible background instead of a series of limitations.

The fast speed of the image and its perfect "definition" are upset to look at the overlapping of uses or spontaneous transformations. All of this tends to exclude the slow perception and appropriation in time from the users, which was a real second project phase in the past (a complement of the building) and ensured progressive and stable roots in places and society. A mechanism that at the same time made possible the propagation of traditions or constructive practices that guaranteed the acknowledgement and durability of a specific work by finding itself again in other works.

The image extracted from a relationship with reality is, by nature, subject to a much faster decay than the one the materials the architectures are made of would naturally be subject to. Thus, materials always more long lasting accompany images always more deteriorated, determining an alteration in the relationship among form, matter and meanings that constitutes one of the unsolved nodes of current architecture.

### *Identity, architecture, image*

*This takes us to a question already anticipated at the beginning: identity. However, we will face it this time considering the role developed by architecture when consolidating itself, through multiple declinations, within the places where its action takes place. It is difficult to talk about consolidated identities through architecture today, the memory of dramatic events that, claiming to defend presumed identities, have used architecture structurally linking it to the fate of political regimes of various bands, is still fresh. Nowadays we know too well that architecture forms do not come directly from those politics and that the relationship that characterizes them makes this impossible, but the convention that a certain architecture has been directly generated by a certain regime and is then indissolubly linked to it is difficult to eradicate.*

*Unexpectedly, however, it is precisely the process of change in progress in the world that takes the question to the forefront. The apparent standardization in a few places, habits and information that characterizes our times and the globalization of markets and behaviours, that according to several analysis done these years would have determined a progressive attenuation of local identities, when they multiply themselves, are accompanied by particularities, nationalisms, exhibited diversities, resuscitated and also straightforwardly invented out of nothing, which proves that belonging to a global world does not cancel man's demand to vindicate his own differences. Old and new identities are crossed with unprecedented speed, interlinking the*

*matters of history and contemporaneity always in a different way.*

*Architecture becomes, once more, an instrument of this process. If the replica of pagodas or utong in Eastern enclaves of America or Europe, does not certainly constitute a relevant phenomenon from the point of view of educated architecture, being more related with the field of folklore, the phenomenon is closely related to the demands of eradicated communities that trust architecture with the job of preserving their identity, even in a distorted way.*

*This demand at a higher level, does not find a relationship with the images shown of the ghostly buildings that should represent our time and that, on the contrary, seem rather to contribute to the reiteration of a world of their own, where they, all of them very similar because of the use of the same engineering societies, of the same construction techniques and the same materials, seem interested in dialoguing more between them than with what surrounds them, interested in the common effort of producing homologated impressions and in a short range.*

*This does not mean that, under the lucid surfaces and the networks, phenomena of longer duration and greater interest that a glass facade or a metal railing cannot interpret, are not being determined.*

*Definitely, what wanted to be removed, that is, the remaining diverse identities even in a globalized world, does not seem to be removable. An architecture based mainly on the exaltation of its own image cannot think of declining this diversity in order to produce new quality occasions.*

*The new identities that spontaneously manifest themselves in the most recent urban expansions or in natural landscapes, would require the architects to recognize and value the differences, rebalance relationships with the environment, rethink urban structures, interpret new materials and what cannot be done through the trivial reproposal of architectural objects indifferent to the places which raise interest exclusively thanks to unlimited budgets and special effects. The new challenges that the places mean for architects would demand, today, taking into consideration the relationships between things rather than the appearance of things themselves, which is not possible for a project practice even today irresistibly attracted by the charm of fast consumption images and the "idolatry" of functional programmes or of technical solutions.*

*The demand for knowledge and quality set to us by the new conditions we live in, has had as a response a kind of formal cynicism, no longer favoured for the freshness of the vanguard, but rather crammed by stylistic and theoretical repetitions that spread in the world the "manner" of "autistic" objects rather than a renewed practice with what surrounds it.*

*In spite of this, even in the daily transformations that change the face of the territories we inhabit, new materials, new figures and revealing relationships generate a wealth that is acknowledged only partly and almost never interpreted or represented.*

*The overpowering images generate, then, fixation, standardization and early obsolescence. And, among the consequences of their action on architecture practices and theory, it is its incapacity to influence positively the development of new and multiple identities that our places need.*

*The architectural image today is too separated from the context it belongs to and its expiration times are too fast conditioned by the succession of fashions.*

#### **Times of change**

*On the other hand, the presence of the image world is now an integrating part of our times and it would be useless to give it a moralist rejection. However, things can change abruptly when various general conditions change; an unprecedented crisis, together with a mutated sensitivity towards the environment we live in, actually constitute a big change. Can we respond to the new demands for compatibility and attention that are manifested all over the world using the culture that has dominated architecture in recent years: architectural stardom, muscular tests, placeless architecture, unlimited economic waste? I do not think so. It is possible that so many things that have been dropped (knowledge, sensitivities, culture, and so on) may now recharge arrogantly and need updating: How can diverse environments be read and interpreted? How can history legacy be protected and brought to life? How can nature be respected? How can we produce without waste and with low impact? How can we insert fragments of quality into our cities? So that all of this does not become a list of slogans*

*(which in fact have the same fixation and volatility of images) it is necessary to reflect deeply on what has been and what will be. If architecture spreads itself by means of renders, animation beyond what is real, etc., it will not mutate, substantially, in its main role: The instruments we have today which give us unprecedented facilities for the elaboration and the communication of a project must not become obstacles to understand reality. Even influenced by the change we know, the main challenge of architecture, its civil role, is to improve places, make them recognizable and make man's life more pleasant. How to do it again in a condition that takes attention towards essential questions such as the balanced relationship with nature, reusing what has been built, energy saving?*

*It would perhaps be necessary to reflect again on a question that has strongly marked the latest years of the 1900s: the separation between image and meaning and the consequences this has had on architecture. It is perhaps possible today to reflect upon this, try architecture to have a meaning in addition to form, to produce values and not only images and to give life to a new generation of studies and "virtuous" projects. Only in this way, the reversal of roles between image and matter that has characterized architecture in the last decades will finally attenuate itself, and architects will be able to improve the real world and devote themselves not only to illustrate magazine or web pages, or to construct a fictitious world.*

#### **Conclusions**

*As it can be seen, when we face a thorny issue like the one that has to do with communication in architecture and its relapses in the contemporary world, the picture immediately becomes complex. What I have intended in this essay is to give an account of an "unbalance" in the architecture-image relationship, that becomes explosive when the architecture function crosses social and urban phenomena on an unprecedented scale.*

*The questions, as it can be seen, are basically the same all the time. Architecture has always developed from an ambiguous relationship with its own image; its closeness to the questions linked to the identity of the people, territories or cities has always been an obstacle for reading progress linearly. All of this constitutes the most fascinating and complex part of its nature. If we are interested in this subject again today, as we anticipated at the beginning and reviewed at the end of these reflections, it is so that when faced by a golden "guettization" of architecture in the realm of an exclusive production, signs of how its full effort would be necessary on the most important questions of our time can be seen again. Since we cannot think that the future professional destiny of many young architects might be linked to replicas at all levels produced by the architectural star-system, since this system now seems unsustainable and aged, then many questions traditionally linked to the history of architecture return today: the diffused quality, the relationship between architecture and landscape, between architecture and city, social architecture, the form of infrastructures, the reutilization of what*

*we have produced so far, and so on.*

*It has to do with unavoidable questions but implying a new culture, a new analytical capacity and new instruments, a new lightness that can be excavated in the artificial complications of mediatic and productive mechanisms that seem to have been made on purpose in order to take architecture away from common sense, to face again the real questions, at any scale that they may manifest themselves, with the same type of effort and passion, under the protection of a renewed conviction of the need for architecture in our time, also restoring, in this way, the balance of the image-matter relationship, exploiting the potentialities instead of stressing the deviations. **m***

#### NOTES

(1) Note from the editor: Andrea Di Pietro della Gondola was born in Padua and settled in Vicenza when he was sixteen years old, where his mentor (Gian Giorgio Trissino) gave him the name with which he would make his career: Palladio.

## About the cultural success of the iconic building and the disciplinary resistance

Hugo Mondragón López

*The association between architecture and image enjoys today as much prestige among the mass public, as discredit among the architectural intelligenzia.*

*While the so-called “iconic buildings” are simply irresistible for the architecture culture (composed of politicians interested in management of the territory, real estate promoters, pseudo-specialized journalists and anonymous consumers of all types of images), for the architectural intelligenzia (mainly formed by university professors, artists and followers of every type of countercultural movement), they are almost always disgusting. Between the sensitivity of some and of others, there is a gigantic rift.*

*Recently, the cultural value of iconic buildings has increased exponentially from the most “spectacular” result obtained by the building of the Guggenheim Museum: placing Bilbao on the touristic circuits of Europe. For a politician looking for votes, for an investor interested in making history, for a journalist in search of a piece of*

*news, for all those who feel they know the latest architectural fashion trends, and above all, for the image consumer educated in a society that celebrates the show, the effectiveness of the image-building is undebatable.*

*At the same time, in many disciplinary circles and especially in academic circles, there is a reaction regarding the icon-building which is morally charged. It is distrusted, it is censored and it is labeled as the architectural manifestation of the annoyance of our culture. In this context, in disciplinary circles, it is customary to point at photography and architecture magazines as the messengers of the iconic building and responsible for reducing architecture to mere images.*

*What is the origin and how can we explain the distrust of these disciplinary groups towards the image? Are photographs and architecture magazines responsible for the spectacularization of architecture and its reduction to a mere image? Is iconic architecture and the relationship between architecture and image an exclusive contemporary phenomenon?*

#### Image and project

*The role of architecture as a communication tool is as old as its own origin. The same stone used in the construction of walls and pillars of the architecture of the past, was used as a support to write, carve and sculpt on it all types of myths, messages, deeds, and so on. I am thinking, for example, of the hieroglyphs carved on the pillars located in the hipostolic<sup>(1)</sup> chamber of an Egyptian temple; in the sculpted friezes of the doric temples; in the reliefs of the gates of the romanic and gothic*