

Fragments

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ABSTRACT

San Rocco is a journal that publishes writing about buildings, drawings, projects, and built or drawn ideas from around the world. It is based on the idea that architecture is a collective knowledge and that this knowledge can take different forms within an architectural magazine – essays, illustrations, designs, etc. Each issue of the journal defines a field of interest through the presentation of a topic. This text reflects on the contents, means and methods of San Rocco. Structured as a series of short excerpts that cover different questions about the magazine, both practical and conceptual, it offers an overview of this journal's position regarding the practice of architecture, its theory, its relation to history and the role of writing within the discipline.

THE MAGAZINE

San Rocco is a magazine about architecture that was launched in September 2010 in Venice on the occasion of the Architecture Biennale and was designed to have a run of five years, i.e.,

the magazine was to stop production at the end of its five-year plan, something that was decided at the very beginning when the list of the themes to be addressed in each issue was determined.

San Rocco approaches architecture in an eminently simple way: it encourages writing about buildings, drawings, projects, and built or drawn ideas from around the world without having to pay homage to the latest cultural trend.

The topics addressed in each issue are discussed rigorously but also freely, with a sense of ingenuity, sometimes a little bravery, and often a delicate sense of irony, and without insisting upon philological accuracy.

San Rocco is now semi-dead, as we are printing the issue 14 and we will make only sixteen issues in total, so as we started on issue 0, only one issue is left.

PRACTICAL

San Rocco rents the cellar of the architectural practices PioveneFabi and YellowOffice's office, in corso Indipendenza, Milan. From a material point of view, San Rocco is simply that storage and Mrs. Chiara Carpenter, the administrator, who organizes everything related to production, administration and shipment. She is the only employee of the magazine. Normally she does not work at our 'headquarters'.

In order to make the magazine, we meet three times per issue: the first time to speak about the content and to write down the call for papers, then to evaluate

the proposals we received, and one last time to make a list of drawings to be made, define the cover and talk more in detail graphic design issues. It is very simple and practical.

DRAWINGS

The axonometric drawings in San Rocco are made by the architect Michele Marchetti. We decided to re-draw some of the objects featuring in the issues because we thought that a graphic interpretation was possible together with a textual one. The drawings are rather simplified and they are, most of the time, represented in an awkward axonometric projection, one that basically attaches the elevation right onto the plan. Sometimes this is called Egyptian or Chinese axonometry, but actually we do not really know much about it (none of us is particularly erudite in projective geometry). I think we liked it because it is at the same time very architectural and very naïve, and sometimes it produces very strange results.

A LIST

Innocence, islands, the even covering of the field, mistakes, concepts-context, scary architects, collaborations, indifference, the primitive hut, minimalism, ecology, Bramante, the client, beauty and 1966 are the fifteen themes that San Rocco featured on its first Five Year Plan. Muerte will be the last one.

We defined the list of topics together. We made a first version of the list at the beginning (the so called "Five Years Plan") and then we changed whenever we

felt the original list was not interesting anymore. As in any five years plan, the plan was changed whenever we needed to do and, as in any five years plan, we always pretended we never changed. Actually, the issues we were no more interested in were not really cancelled, but just postponed (but however, given that we would anyhow not do more than a certain amount of issues, they were actually dispatched). Somewhere we have a list of issues that will never be done, in most cases there are also a few notes for those never-to-be-born issues. We do not know what we will do with this stuff.

TOPICS

San Rocco 00 (Innocence) *“investigated the possibility of an architecture that is both open and personal, both monumental and fragile, both rational and questioning: an unlikely and innocent architecture”* (San Rocco, n.d.-a).

San Rocco 01 (Islands) *used Gilles Deleuze’s categories⁽¹⁾ of “oceanic and continental [islands] (...) to explore the possibility of architectural islands, either literally or by analogy”* (San Rocco, n.d.-b).

San Rocco 02 (The Even Covering of the Field) *explored the continuous expansion of “agriculture and city and expansion of city and sprawl and infrastructure and trash and buildings and favelas and old villages and gated communities and agriculture and some more other buildings”* (San Rocco, n.d.-c).

San Rocco 03 (Mistakes) *was interested in “mistakes that are the product of a disproportion, of a displacement; mistakes that are somehow generous, open, brave; mistakes that involve some sort of heroic failure; mistakes that shed a new light on the limits of the very same rule that labels them as mistakes”* (San Rocco, n.d.-d).

San Rocco 04 (Fuck Concepts! Context!) *investigated the state of self-inflicted despair whereby architectural design needs to be justified point by point, thereby creating the unnecessary feeling that architecture needs to apologize for any decision it takes and attacked the equation “concept = theory” by stating “concepts are a tool used to justify design decisions in the absence of architecture”* (San Rocco, n.d.-e).

San Rocco 05 (Scary Architects) *looked into the intimately terrifying nature of architecture: “if architecture is the most tangible sign of an oppressive architecture of society, design can be understood as an expression of this original evil”* (San Rocco, n.d.-f).

San Rocco 06 (Collaborations), *on the other hand, explored the “common ground [required to produce architecture]. As far as collaboration in architecture is concerned, there are two fundamental possibilities: collaborations based on a shared grammar (e.g., as in the Renaissance) and collaborations based on shared extra-disciplinary values (e.g., the case of the Modern Movement)”* (San Rocco, n.d.-g).

San Rocco 07 (Indifference) *explored the art of ignoring, of forgetting, of saving energy and devised a possible universe of things not to care about* (San Rocco, n.d.-h).

San Rocco 08 (What’s Wrong with the Primitive Hut?) *put into question Marc-Antoine Laugier’s not-so-innocent fable of the primitive hut, which “as silly as it may at first seem, [was] not all that innocent. Some of its curious presuppositions are crucial for the understanding of modernism”* (San Rocco, n.d.-i) *and, we may say, of today’s late-capitalism.*

San Rocco 09 (Monks and Monkeys) *wielded a critique towards minimalism “in order to imagine, beyond all of these nightmares, spaces without intentions”* (San Rocco, n.d.-j).

San Rocco 10 (Ecology) *suggested that we need to consider ecology as “the approach that aims at facilitating the survival of the human species in the long term and pursues this goal by considering the world as a totality” and argued that “[e]cology (i.e., socialism) is in need of a theory, but no such theory currently exists” and that “[e]cology means planning”* (San Rocco, n.d.-k).

San Rocco 11 (Happy Birthday Bramante!), *together with wishing Bramante a happy birthday, argued that he “is the most important architect in the history of Western architecture” because he “imagined a single, universal architectural language that could deal with any potential architectural problem” and that alone was sufficient reason for this issue* (San Rocco, n.d.-l).

San Rocco 12 (The Client Issue) *denounced the lack of proper clients – that is, the disappearance of the State and public good as both client and agenda, which resulted in, well, bad architecture* (San Rocco, n.d.-m).

San Rocco 13 (Pure Beauty) *dared to talk about beauty in this way: “If the production of beauty is an explicit goal of architecture, then aren’t we in need of a proper theory of beauty?”* (San Rocco, n.d.-n).

San Rocco 14 (66) *brings back the attention to 1966 as a moment in which “the stage seemed set for a productive critique of modernism and the development of a more mature approach to the intricacies of architecture. Architecture seemed on the verge of*

rediscovering its collective nature and about to redefine its knowledge starting from the city" (San Rocco, n.d.-o).

The topics were simply things that interested us, and of course some are more relevant than others, and actually the most important things are also coming back. Innocence/Mistakes/Scary Architects/Pure Beauty is basically the same issue and Indifference/Bramante is again one thing and Field/Context/Primitive Hut is another one. But, of course, the different issues approached these topics from very different points of view.

The fact that the traditions of these discussions are very different has never been particularly important to us. In this respect, we just did not care, or maybe better we hid ourselves behind our self-proclaimed innocence and tried to be "as shrewd as doves", as Franco Fortini once proposed (1962). San Rocco was a very serious project and, exactly because of that, it was a rather humorous one as well.

THE CENTRE

San Rocco is busy with the obvious, with the centre of the discipline, not with the new frontier. This was the reason why we made the magazine, because we felt nobody was discussing the real problems, that nobody wanted to speak about contemporary architecture's 'elephants in the room'. We wanted to discuss – in (maybe clumsy but at least, in principle, serious) theoretical terms – what we were doing every day with our practices. Some issues were very direct (the Field issue about our everyday desperation in working inside of landscapes such as Northern Italy or Flanders, Indifference as a way to operate in that same context), other more indirect (Bramante and Primitive Hut), but there was really no love for erudition per se in San Rocco.

And the proof of this is that now that we have a rather successful formula that could be applied to endless extravagant matters, we actually close down the business.

KNOWLEDGE

Many of San Rocco's tables of content appear as a sort of catalogue. Some issues actually declare that that is their objective (such as on Islands), others do not, but end up being a list or catalogue of interpretations of a same given topic. Catalogues are ways of organising knowledge, an attempt to record all possible elements of a given subject yet, we didn't like the index so much because of its open-endedness, but because it is short, dry and a bit enigmatic. It is not that we wanted to cover all possible positions. Sure, we did not have a clear answer to all problems, but we never particularly liked the idea of the 'open work' nor the idea that 'all is interpretation'. We were looking for conclusions, for solutions. We had nothing against preaching the naked truth in clear and peremptory terms, but we simply did not happen to know it. So, our relative inclusiveness was just because we were too lazy.

THEORY

The architectural knowledge that San Rocco put forward was useful architectural knowledge. Useful not in the sense of the Neufert, but useful to orient our work as practitioners. Useful as the idea that architecture can only be learned from the understanding of the buildings of the past, as the idea that the knowledge that can be decoded from those buildings is collective, as the idea that architecture is not a media and buildings are not signs. Useful to prevent us from wasting time with irrelevant problems.

This is the only reason for theory: theory helps solving practical problems. Tolstoy once wrote – in What is to be done? (1886/1929) – that there must have been some pretty bad theories circulating in the world if there is even just the shadow of a doubt about a possible opposition between theory and practice. Then Tolstoy gave a very convincing example: if there were a theory of making bread, it would be that first you knead and then you put it in the oven, and only a mad man would make bread against this theory.

Theory (and San Rocco tried to produce theory in these terms) creates conditions to look at practical problems in reasonable terms (for instance, eliminating as much as possible useless superstitions). But then, of course, theory does not go beyond that, theory does not solve the problems...

OBJECTS

San Rocco is interested in buildings and the making of buildings.

San Rocco is totally uninterested in a theory of San Rocco. 'Who are we?' is really an uninteresting question.

POSITION

Knowledge is located in buildings, and it is produced both after buildings (as reflection on reality) and before buildings (as an attempt to transform reality). To determine which of the two is more fundamental to architecture is very complicated, it is a sort of chicken-egg problem, but in our opinion the observation of reality is here the most fundamental thing. Architecture is a reflection on the reality of the (already existing) city. And this is perfectly explained by Rossi in L'Architettura della Città (1966): 'architecture presupposes the city' (and this of course means

– once again – that the 'primitive hut' is superstition and that modernism is obsolete).

HISTORY

History is the only thing you can learn from. This seems to be a rather radical position (there is no way to learn something about architecture outside of learning from 'history of architecture') but it should be understood together with a very loose and extended notion of history of architecture as “all the buildings made before this instant”, so not only 'history of architecture' as “the great architecture of the past”, but all sorts of existing buildings: dry-laundries, data centres, shopping malls, atomic power plants, bus deposits. What we mean is that it is possible to learn only from the experience of the past, but this experience is enormous, constantly growing and made of very different kinds of things, from the Parthenon to garages in remote provinces of Pakistan.

THE FUTURE

The fact is that our first Five-Year Plan has proved to be a complete success. San Rocco achieved all of its objectives: it established a new framework for contemporary discussion on architecture, indoctrinated its fair share of fanatics, re-affirmed the coolness of what's cool and exposed the stupidity of stupid things. As a result, San Rocco is no longer needed! Comrades, we have won!

Now the only danger is not to recognize this. So – as much as we might dislike it – we need to change. And let's admit it, after a while even good things start to get boring.

In order to avoid becoming boring, we have decided that San Rocco must become even more boring. San Rocco

will move on to making books. In the next five years, San Rocco will launch three different series of books on architecture:

1) a series of monographs on architects provisionally titled '7 Projects', with each volume addressing a collection of only 7 projects by the architect it discusses;

2) a series of pairs of short biographies provisionally called 'Le Vite' written somewhat in the manner of Vasari's Lives (1550/2008) and at the same time paired in the manner of Plutarch's Parallel Lives (1517/2001);

3) an encyclopaedia of cities provisionally entitled 'The Universal History of Cities' based on the model of Leonardo Benevolo's *Le città nella storia d'Europa* (2008) that aims to provide a basic knowledge of the urban development of significant cities around the world. 

NOTES

(1) See Deleuze, 2003.

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