

On Indifference

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What is generally recognized as a problem in teaching today, is that stylistic concerns and rhetorical methodologies are becoming less relevant to both the architectural discourse and the pragmatics of contemporary practice, yet often persist in universities. It is not so much a movement towards reconciliation of practice and academic interests that have informed this recent change in attitude, but the successes and failures of the past twenty years in both these fields. As an argument against formulaic methodologies, the notion of “*positive indifference*” was recently used by the Swiss architect Cristian Sumi, as a specifically understood attitude towards modernism as a pedagogical discipline. Rather than assuming an absolute position in favor of, or against, modernism, one can now realize the potential of its historical and theoretical concerns which pervade the architectural objects, and to some extent the urban strategies, of its generations, and necessarily determine the context for any future work.

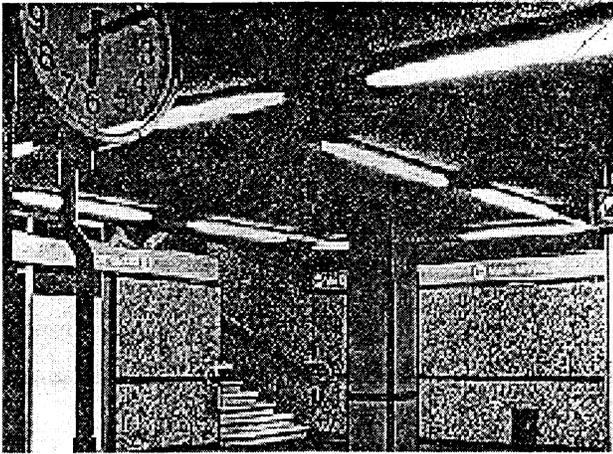
One can take advantage of considerable distance with regard to the purist and moralizing attitudes of the “classical” modernists, at this point in time, and define a different notion of abstraction with regard to the essentializing aspects which constituted their architecture. But rather than trying to empty the architectural object of all meaning, or seeking meaning in the historical sign, one might research and explore the ways by which perception of the relationships between materials, space, light, and volumetric proportions is constructed as a means to allow for the concrete to bear the conceptual. Abstraction could both be a logical disruption and an intuitive reconstitution of the relationships between the architectural elements, through subtle inflections of their conventional modular nature, or familiar methods of construction, to become metaphorically reminiscent of historical or theoretical referents. Abstraction is articulated as an attitude of respectful restraint, and subtlety, to allow an economy of means to become highly efficacious.

The importance of *distance* in cultural production is not a new notion, any significant change requires some degree of loss, yet the “accuracy” of the *distance* is not always relevant and significant. The immediacy of the strategy is the principle which led Manet to abandon chiaroscuro, or

Cezanne to abandon linear perspective. It was no different in principle from the abandonment of figuration, which around 1912 was the separate strategy of painters as diverse as Kupka, Mondrian, Delaunay, Picabia, Kandinsky and Malevich. To abandon something, in terms of cultural production, is not simply to discard it but rather to register the *impossibility* of certain practices. The case of Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades” is one of those instances in which the transformation of the art world was caused by what he called “a beautiful indifference.”

So the question at hand is how can architecture find its own paradoxical resonance without falling into various appropriations of historical precedents or the concerns of imported disciplines. What is to be learned from the ready made is not a direct interpretation of its opposition to the institutional values which it decried but rather how it rendered them from the outside, allowing the signifier to be both art and not art at the same time. The worldwide triumph of technology represents the dissolution of certain aspects of architecture which differentiated attitudes towards construction that characterized regional specificity. At the same time, rather than fulfilling its promise of providing the means for social and economic transformation, the effect of mass production in the construction industry and the practice of architecture resulted in the impoverishment of the role which buildings could play in culture and society. The failure of modern architecture to deliver its promise of social transformation could perhaps be thought of as a result to the very reasons which propelled it; the desire of the integration of art into all facets of social life and the loss of identity of the free artist.

Functionalism was partisan to an essentialist conception of architecture which should not be judged (today) by what it negated but for what it affirmed. Even if we place art and architecture in a cultural perspective where it’s always determined by economy (Marxist aesthetics), we still cannot explain how certain works of art or architecture seem to stay in force. In these instances the work goes beyond given frameworks, not because they transcend the historical state of thought and move towards an Absolute, but because they work for its transformation.



“I walk around with calm, with eyes, with shoes, with fury, with forgetfulness”

Pablo Neruda
excerpt from *Walking Around*

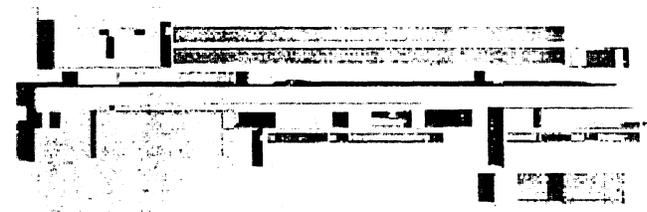
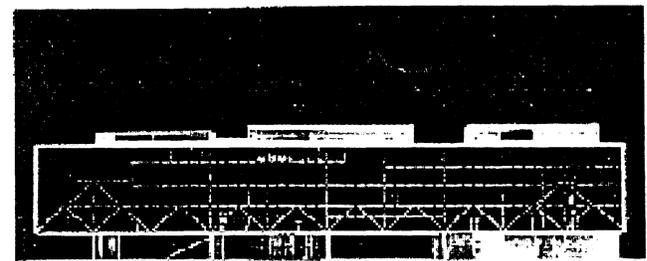
In the Milan subway station project by Franco Albini no apparent effort was made to design its parts, yet in the illustration included, a certain idea is clearly and powerfully intentional. A handrail, which at first might seem an ordinary standard element, is transformed by a subtle deformation which wraps it around the corner of the stairway. The handrail becomes like the arms to the stairwell that welcomes the arrival of the individual in a symbolic encounter with the intentions of the designer, which at this point could be seen as the determining concept of the stairwell. This sensed intentionality reveals a deeper structure which at the end separates its meaning from the frame and subsequently from its context. In other words, what it is, is where it is. The handrail no longer belongs to the same kind of vocabulary of standardization and prefabrication that it was taken from, instead it has taken the effect of a much more personal style, providing a real relationship with the human body and amplifying its presence in space. This presence is only relative to the intuitive recollections which the spectator can resolve with respect to conventional encounters with other stairwells and handrails. A contextual circumstance is turned into an opportunity for mediating between standardization and individualism, relying on the ability of an element to acquire the character of an unpredictable response. It is this sensation that the individual's presence is accounted for, or already implied, which re configures an ordinary situation to acquire a new signification, in the case of the handrail, the simple wrapping around the corner refers to the subject and his or her movement through and in to, or out of the space of the subway station. A “non-gestural gesture” which requires the ability of the spectator to intuitively engage the referential medium that establishes the encounter to infer its implications.

“Modern architecture means first of all an architecture for people belonging to contemporary civilization; it

means an architecture which is morally, socially, economically and spiritually tied to the conditions of our country; it means building in order to represent the ideals of the people, to satisfy their needs, to “serve”, in the true meanings of the world.”

Giuseppe Pagano, “Architettura Nazionale”,
Casabella, no.85, January 1935

In the 1935 project for an art school in Brera, Milano by Figini and Pollini, a peculiar dichotomy is set up by its north and south facades. The north facade is a glass wall that completely opens the interior up to the landscape, allowing the light to enter the studios generously. The south facade is composed of a strip window. This is done in response to the quality of light that a southern orientation has in Milan and the need for controlling the thermal gain. In plan the main circulation of the building has been kept to the center with the exception of the exposition space which has its own entrance. No partition wall divides the spaces and the only thing that determines circulation is the orientation of the stairwells which allows the studio spaces to be pushed to the sides, enjoying the advantage of direct natural light. In section the building works differently, the floor plates are articulated in such a manner as to allow omissions, creating double height spaces, or they are placed sequentially, with a difference of half of a floor height with regards to each other. The spatial consequences are multiple both formally and pragmatically. Spaces are broken up in a way that allows the light to flow



from one space to the other and to reveal different activities to be observed from different vantage points.

The sequential experience of spaces in the building are also perceived sectionally. This sectional interplay displaces the logic of the south facade in a way that might seem in contradiction with the logic of the strip windows. The windows no longer respond to the floor plates; what at first might seem as misplacement or lack of consideration of the interior space in the fenestration of the facade turns out to be an unexpected usage of standard architectural elements. The double height spaces are not accompanied by a high window, instead the sequence of the horizontal windows is maintained displacing the window and with it its disposition with regards to the interior. This move also stretches the horizontal windows for the rooms above the double height spaces, transforming their relationship to both the space underneath and the landscape framed by the window. The space underneath in return offers an unexpected light quality, while it receives two framed images instead of one. The image is separated into the horizontal landscape and a horizontal strip of sky.

It is important at this point to understand that this kind of indifference which I am trying to define is very different than the apathy/contempt which has been associated with the modernist movement. It is crucial that this difference is understood in its relation to construction and the many technological and economical issues that a building has to respond to. In this argument design is the factor which mediates between mass production and the uniqueness of the architectural object by conceiving of a specific way of crafting the mass produced element. Without ignoring the mass produced quality of these products this attitude towards construction creates a space of resistance in the reading of the mass produced object as new relationships are established and affected by their arrangements and size, rhythm and orientations, etc.

The facade by Jean Prouvé to an apartment building designed by another architect in Mozart Square, Paris, could be seen as an example of how this kind of attitude can be used to work with the reading of the building. The plane was composed of identical prefabricated panels of a standard dimension, each panel consisting of three main elements, a window, a solid panel and a moving piece that has three adjustable positions. The window can be adjusted to be either completely open, completely closed or to become a canopy. The person inside the room decides the kind of light effect and transparency which is most desirable. In return the facade receives an uneven texture within the standardized rigid texture that the prefabricated panels inherently have which reflects the individual desire of any given inhabitant. This system subsequently gives the facade a depth that other light filtering devices do not provide. The canopy creates a shadow that defines the area of the window as a projection into the street, blurring the initial or principal reading of the facade as an even and homogeneous panel system. This is not to say that the image of this building was



not carefully considered, or that interior comfort and versatility was the only aims of the skin of the building. On the contrary the skin is considered as both a product of standardized system of construction and a product of the individual desired of the people who utilize the building, creating exceptions and differentiating omissions in the facade, establishing its permanence with the provision of a certain temporality. What is perceived is an adaptation of the real to the ... exigencies of social life. Which disallows for the initial reading of detachment, or anonymity, and paradoxically affords an immediate and non-arbitrary relationship between interior structure of the building (including the life of the inhabitants) and its inscription on the exterior. Its rhetorical significance is inferred upon the perception of the variable differences within the field of the repetitive unit. An apparent indifference could be thought of as a subtle subversion of the technological methods of production and the modernist notion of visual representation as well. The dissolution of the disguise, of the mask of indifference, through the variable operations of a given element by the inhabitant, as perceived only upon a second and more discerning look, in turn allows for an amplification of the manner is inherently, and intriguingly, antithetical to modernist notions of transparency.

“A representation is not a mere image, but an image may speak for it.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein

I'm presenting these cases in an attempt to illustrate the possibilities when we set out to understand—by contrast—the nature of construction restraints as source for a fruitful

and durable meaning, appearing to maintain an attitude of neutrality about the effects of its appearance but formulating a strong claim to authenticity on its own terms. In this way architecture needs to engage in a form of abandonment, affirming new values where it seems to accept old values; this affirmation accepts the historical, social, economic, technological conditions that, since the rise of industrialization, had made the practice of architecture more restrained. We can no longer remain blind in regards to standardization's obstinate claim to defining the specificity of architecture ontologically. To engage standardization with a measured degree of coolness towards its effects will open novel possibilities, directing the abandonment of certain notions of craft into constituting a new craft. It is only in this sense that it is summoned to judge the beauty of indifference and calls for an undecided nomination. It suspends the object between two statements: "this is a mass produced object/this is not a mass produced object". There is no conceptual definition since the aesthetic decision is an experience that escapes all conceptual comprehension.

This new craft establishes itself against the regressive quality of formal preoccupations; in a similar way it could also render any judgment based on taste unjustifiable. In fact, taste evades both examination and judgement; it is a matter for samplers. It oscillates between instinct and fashion, style and prescription. As a notion of art or architecture it is skin-deep both in the sensuous and in the social meaning of the term: it titillates and is a mark of distinction. In the first case it reduces art and architecture to sensation; in the second it introduces a social hierarchy founded on a reality as mysterious and arbitrary as purity of blood or the color of one's skin. Mondrian's attempt to dissolve "taste" found its formal expression in the universal value of his vertical-horizontal symbolism and his triad of

primary colors. With a similar goal in mind Impressionist like Seurat and Cezanne were involved in the destruction of the old craft of painting, allowing color and their inquiry into technique to give birth to a new notion of painting. Malevich's Black Square speaks of the impossibility of painting in a society that valorizes painting ideologically. Taste reflects the values of a past which has no place on contemporary society, if it becomes an issue of taste, it becomes an issue of what aesthetic authorities find proper.

The ultimate goal is not purely expressive or representational; this architecture possesses a certain particularity by which the architectural object proposes an "inner formal structure" that evolves through use and production, marked only by a lack of interest in stylistic categorization that can free the space and the object from its moment and attain the poetics of time (-lessness): the object in its endurance acquires the recollected image that constitutes its true presence in memory, through the articulation and operation of modest attributes in a continuum with the subject it addresses: as the image is accrued through time, it marks the duration of the subject, who so experiences the building equally. This conception of the architectural object directs my argument towards an acceptance of the limitations of systematized construction techniques; simultaneously it allows for architecture to be thought in terms of history and progress. In this sense, the building could present itself independently from the existing hierarchies, indifferent, subtly resisting authority, while pragmatically providing adequate facilities to accommodate its functional purpose. Representation in general is divided into two directions that differ in kind, into two pure presences that do not allow themselves to be represented: that of perception which puts us at once into matter and that of memory with puts us at once into the mind.