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ARCHITECTURE AND PLAY: PRAXIS WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

ARCHITEKTURA I ZABAWA: PRAKTYKA BEZ REPREZENTACJI

Abstract

In this written work, the avant-gardes are not seen as opposed to tradition, but rather as a moment of “openness” in which art and architecture become aware of themselves and their autonomy. This autonomy is structured within a formal space in which the work takes on the value of a strategic and syntactic model and the “doing” the semblances of a constructive procedure. Autonomy and syntactic turning point will ensure that architecture is able to claim its own spaces for itself and to find within itself its own reasons for settlement.

Keywords: architectural composition, narrative structure, semantic architecture

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule awangarda nie jest postrzegana jako przeciwieństwo tradycji, ale raczej jako moment „otwarcia”, w którym sztuka i architektura zyskują świadomość siebie i swojej autonomii. Autonomia ta skonstruowana jest w przestrzeni formalnej, w której dzieło nabiera wartości modelu strategicznego i syntaktycznego, a jego „wykonanie” znamion procedury konstruktywnej. Autonomia i syntaktyczny punkt zwrotny pozwolą architekturze upomnieć się o własne przestrzenie i znaleźć w niej samej powody do zasiedlenia ich.

Słowa kluczowe: kompozycja architektoniczna, struktura narracyjna, architektura semantyczna

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Demolition Job* which the historical avant-gardes worked on in the early decades of the 20th century has little to do with the idea of a *tabula rasa*. Rather, what they have in common is the attempt to set aside for a moment the precepts and canons of tradition in order to finally recover these within a more general “formal space”.

The nature of this space had already been grasped by a poet, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who wrote: “For him, a single thing is equivalent to many, since he sees it symbolically”¹. Unlike a simple descriptive technique, the constructive procedure typical of poets and artists abandons pre-established rules and relies on the properties of symbols. Starting from a point of view – a “seeing as” (*Sehen als*) – humans realise their dominion over the notion of the infinite, circumscribing their field of possibilities. The techniques and rules of this way of

¹ H. von Hofmannsthal, *L'ignoto che appare. Scritti 1891–1914*, Adelphi, Milano 1991, p. xx.

acting cannot be separated from what we want to express, and the validity of the procedure, which Aldo Giorgio Gargani defines as a “regulated symbolic procedure”, depends on the degree of persuasiveness of what is made. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, Aldo Giorgio Gargani writes: “formal proof is a *paradigm*, a *harmonious figure*, from the examination of which we emerge convinced: proof is a convincing image”².

We could say that the space we have been talking about has three characteristics: 1. it is a deep space; 2. it is an organic space; 3. it is the space of transfiguration.

1. As Noam Chomsky explains so well with the concepts of “deep structure” and “surface structure”³ (which Wittgenstein had already anticipated with those of “depth grammar” and “surface grammar”), formal space is a layered space with different levels of depth. In rhetoric, the figures that oversee the transformations in a literary space can act at the level of meaning (metaphor), of form (metaplasm) and of the order in which the elements are arranged (metataxis).

2. The organic nature of formal space is explained well by Karl Kraus when he speaks of language as an “organically connected weaving”⁴, which has in itself the resources for its own development. This means that the relations between symbols are “internal relations”. They are expressed according to the possibilities inherent in their properties, i.e. autonomously and there is no “paradigm outside the topic”⁵.

3. However much the topic is susceptible to variation and articulation, the objective remains the completeness, the organic nature and the intelligibility of the work. And what is new can only be given as a transfiguration of the existing: “In its mutation, in the succession of genres and conventions, art seeks to conserve the concreteness of mutable information, since unchanging information is no longer information. The world changes, art changes – I think now – to preserve a link with life. But it also changes by preserving the old forms, as a criterion of measurement”⁶.

2. TRANSFIGURATIONS I (JOHN HEJDUK): INVERSIONS, DOUBLINGS, SUBSTITUTIONS⁷

Inversions. After visiting Italy, John Hejduk wrote a beautiful essay, in 1980, on Casa Malaparte, from which the figure of the stair-theater would become a recurring obsession in numerous projects. The type of the classical theater undergoes an interpretation completely different from usual. The stair-roof-theater of Casa Malaparte has its back to the sea and looks – says Hejduk – at a hole in the rock:

² A.G. Gargani, *Stili di analisi. L'unità perduta del metodo filosofico*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1993, p. 98. See chapter “5. Tecniche descrittive e procedure costruttive”.

³ See N. Chomsky, *L'analisi formale del linguaggio*, Boringhieri, Torino 1969.

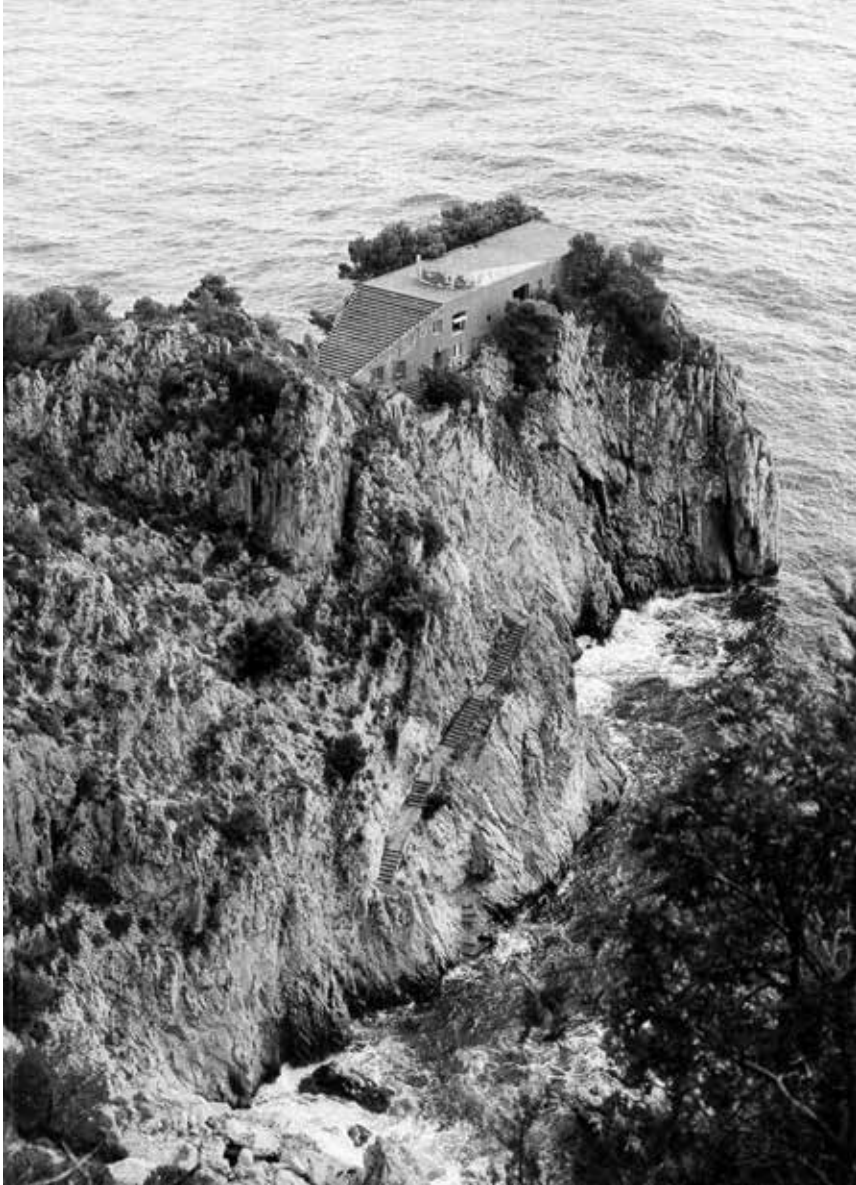
⁴ W. Iggers, *Karl Kraus. A Viennese Critic of the Twentieth Century*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1967, pp. 21–24, 90.

⁵ See A.G. Gargani, *Wittgenstein. Musica, parola, gesto*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2008, p. 16.

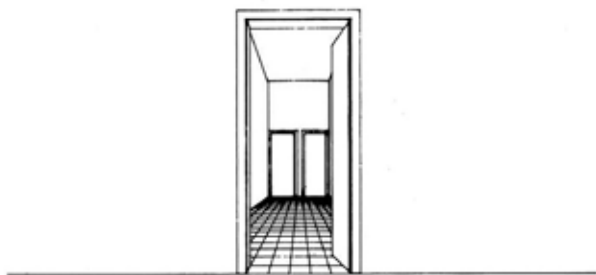
⁶ V. Sklovskij, *La mossa del cavallo* (1923), De Donato – Leonardo da Vinci, Bari 1967, p. XI.

⁷ See L. Amistadi, *Una casa come loro. Curzio Malaparte e John Hejduk*, [in:] A. Borsari, M. Cassani Simonetti, G. Iacoli (ed.), *Architetture. Forma e narrazione tra architettura e letteratura*, Mimesis, Milano–Udine 2019.

the stair serves a double purpose: it is access to the vision of sky and sea, and upon one's descent, going back, the stair acts as the seating for a theater, setting the imaginary audience's backs to the horizontal horizon line of the sea, their eyes focusing on a diminishing vanishing point which disappears into a dark orifice garlanded by plant and rock. It is the observation of nature's womb from which we formally entered the play of our life and it is opening which receives us in our final exit. (Ill. 1, 2)



Ill. 1. Adalberto Libera, Curzio Malaparte, Casa Malaparte in Capri, 1937.



III. 2. Casa Malaparte.

“The perspective is distorted”⁸, adds Hejduk.

In “Pantomime Theater” (1979–1983) the funnel-shaped stair-theater is doubled and its typological nature is stressed according to all possible combinations: many spectators and one mime, many mimes and one spectator. In addition, a brass band finds its place under the steps (Ill. 3).

The idea of expressing and experiencing all the possibilities that a theatrical machine can establish in the relationship between performance and the world takes shape in “Theater Masque” (1979–1983). The spectator is placed in front of a screen, the screen opens onto a stage, the stage lowers, supported by a hydraulic piston, and the spectator finally sees the real world. As if that were not enough, the theatrical “machine” also doubles in section, and the stair-theater flips into the hollow figure of a triangular pool in which it is impossible to swim: as the swimmer progresses, the pool narrows and the water becomes shallower. The tip of the triangular pool touches the edge of a cliff.

⑧ PANTOMIME THEATER

A DOUBLE EXTERIOR THEATER
WITH A DOUBLE BRASS THEATER
UNDERNEATH.

A SINGLE PLAYER (MIME) TO A
FULL AUDIENCE, MANY PLAYERS
(MIMES) TO A SINGLE AUDIENCE.

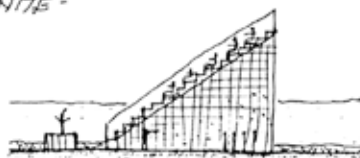
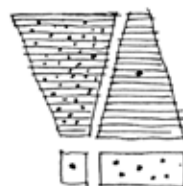
MANY BRASS PLAYERS TO A
SINGLE AUDIENCE, A SINGLE BRASS
PLAYER TO A MANY AUDIENCE.

DOUBLE THEATERS;
TWO OUTDOOR (PANTOMIME)
TWO ENCLOSED (SOUND-BASS)

LOCATED NORTH OF WIND TOWER.

STRUCTURE: REINFORCED CONCRETE
FACED WITH GRANITE-
STONE.

OPEN 24 HOURS A DAY



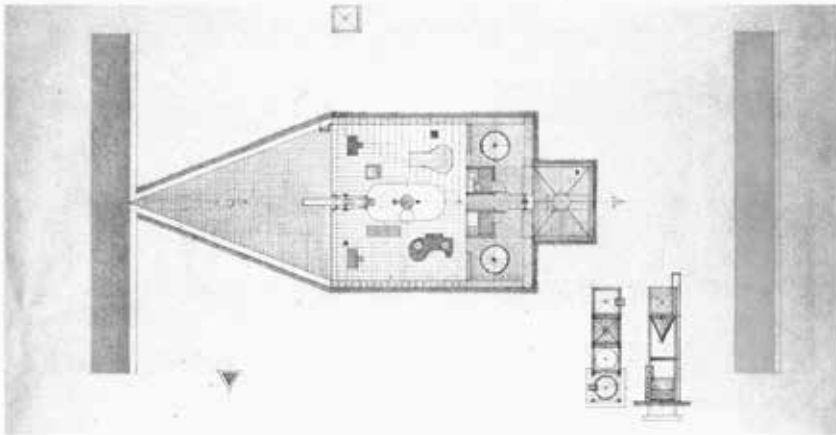
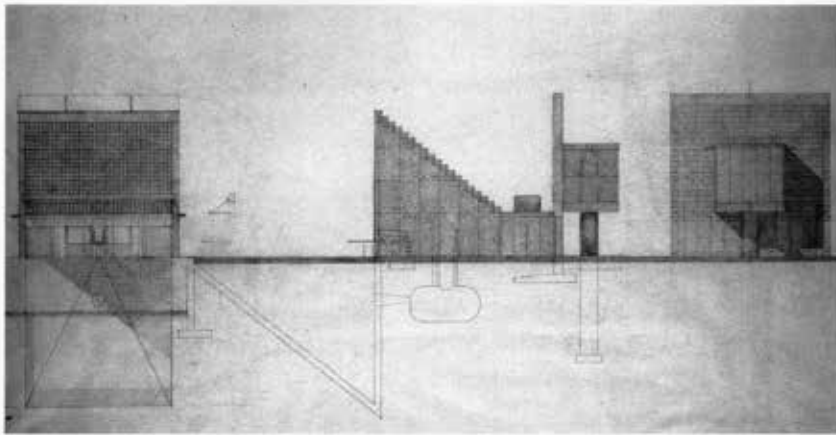
Ill. 3. John Hejduk, “Pantomime Theater”, 1979–1983.

Below the theater, between land and water, the hypogeal figure of a submarine projects a beam of light into the pool. The scene is organic: “It’s a man, his penis is here, and his sperm is in the pool”⁹ (Ill. 4).

Doublings. The “Portrait of Comtesse d’Haussonville” by Ingres is, not surprisingly, Hejduk’s favorite painting. The image of the countess is doubled in the mirror, but unlike Narcissus, the reflection occurs from behind and the duchess is not mortally trapped in her gaze.

⁸ J. Hejduk, *Cable from Milan*, Domus 605, April 1980, p. 12.

⁹ J. Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa*, Rizzoli International, New York 1985, p. 134.



Ill. 4. John Hejduk, “Theater Masque”, 1979–1983.

It is a vital and iridescent kind of doubling, in which opposites alternate again and again without cancelling each other out: weeping and laughter, day and night, gold and silver, sun and moon, Gide and Proust (Ill. 5).

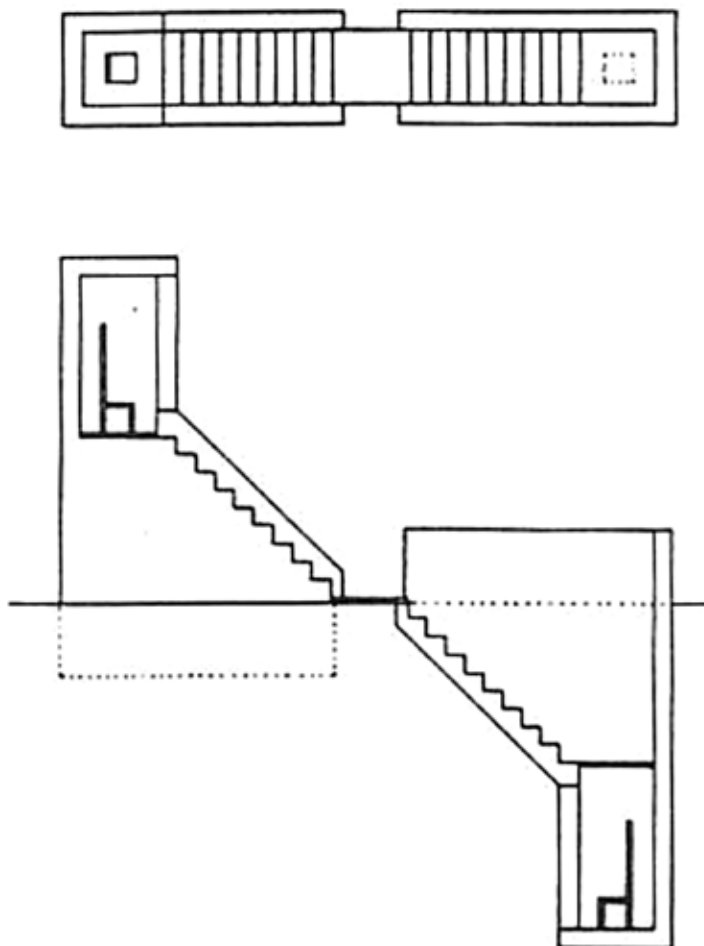
Hejduk’s work is full of these doublings. In “Judge-Stairs” (1986, Ill. 6) at the top of a staircase sits the judge, but the judge is the other side of the coin and sits at the bottom of the hypogeal doubling of the staircase itself. Among the 96 institutions in the project for Vladivostok¹⁰ drawn by Hejduk, the Ministry of Health is doubled with the Ministry of Illness, just like the Ministry of Development itself, which cannot miss the counterbalance of a regress. Among the complementary doublings, the most explicit is certainly number 69, with the intercourse of Object and Subject. Down the hallway beyond the major “living room” of Casa Malaparte two doors open “...one good? one evil? The choice is ours as in the courtyard of the Alhambra in Granada”¹¹.

¹⁰ See J. Hejduk, *Vladivostok*, Rizzoli International, New York 1989.

¹¹ J. Hejduk, *Cable from Milan*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.



Ill. 5. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Portrait of Comtesse of Haussonville, 1845.



III. 6. John Hejduk, “Judge-Stairs”, 1986.

Substitutions. Max Black in *Modelli Archetipi Metafore*¹² calls metaphors more simply “substitutions”. In our case, the substitutions are: door → submarine hatch; plan → Egyptian burial paddle; house → sphinx, tomb; windows → dark circles of a fossil monster; solarium → velarium, a petrified sail.

The plan of the house is most ambiguous. It may be a description of a program and it might not be. It reminds one of something from pre-Christian ages; yes, that is it. The plan is really an elevation of one of the wood Egyptian burials paddles placed in the tomb of a Pharaoh against the wall of his last resting place. It has a diminishing handle sometimes wrapped by ropes and on the paddle flat itself are various signs and symbols telling of the leader’s life, his triumphs and... The plan of the Malaparte house is an inscription. One cannot find the entrance to this house... it is hidden like the tombs¹³.

¹² Cfr. M. Black, *Modelli Archetipi Metafore*, Pratiche, Parma 1983.

¹³ J. Hejduk, *Cable from Milan*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Francesco Venezia: “The white element on the solarium is a velarium unrolled from its cylindrical support and anchored to the floor: it is a petrified sail”¹⁴.

But the most important substitution is the great metaphor represented by the amoeboid shape of the living room table: “In the middle of the major ‘living room’ floats a biomorphic slab. Upon expulsion from the depths one passes this centralized floating amoeba”¹⁵.

3. TRANSFIGURATIONS II (LUCIANO SEMERANI)

In May 2021, Luciano Semerani sent me the text of a lecture he asked me to read to my students. The part on the Osoppo town hall was divided into four sections, which correspond to as many transfiguration techniques.

The Town Hall of Osoppo gave substance to four ideas that in a more or less latent form recur in our works [Ill. 7, 8, 9]:

1. the elimination of materiality in the elements of architectural construction;
2. ‘The Matryoshka,’ the Russian doll that contains within it other dolls all the same but smaller and smaller, namely the interlocking of boxes of different sizes within a single formal configuration;
3. the assumption of the curved line as an ‘irruption’ in the ordered narrative;
4. the ‘gutting’ of buildings that produce ‘the urban interior’ by staging their own ‘building internal organs’.

The walls covered with white Marmorino become so thin as to recall the function of *periaktoi* in theater scenes rather than load-bearing structures.

The interlocking tortoiseshell, the Matryoshka, magnificently exemplified for example by Plečnik in the Cemetery of Ljubljana, creates the idea of ‘interstitial space’ which fits in distinctly among our other ‘space’ perceiving experiences.

The preference for the curved line, more or less lowered with respect to our eye, is reminiscent of the thought of Henry van de Velde, the maestro so much loved by Ernesto Nathan Rogers.



Ill. 7, 8, 9. Town Hall of Osoppo, 1979.

¹⁴ F. Venezia, *Casa Malaparte*, Arquitectos de Cádiz, Cadice 2001, p. 57.

¹⁵ J. Hejduk, *Cable from Milan*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Van de Velde argues that in the line there is ‘the free affirmation of life in objects.’ It draws its life from the same source of life that we find in objects; and like life, it is ‘will in movement’, i.e., our ‘self’ in movement and ‘objectified’... ‘The line primarily represents the movement caused by my inner activity; it is an action that depends on me. But at the same time this action is proper to the line’.

Important, in conclusion, is to point out how part of ‘urban space’ is attended by what are not ‘street furniture’ but ‘symbolic space measuring objects,’ such as the window box, the memorial corner column, the Egyptian-style entrance ramp.

This is what we were taught by Plečnik, who integrates the idea of ‘public space’ with that of ‘city place’.

4. TRANSMUTATIONS III

Stairs. There are two ways of understanding stairs. One is that shown in this beautiful drawing by Gigetta Tamaro, i.e., stairs as a completed object, defined once and for all, with a beginning and an end: “A cat raising its tail declares: end of the cat! How do stairs do that?”¹⁶ The other way is more strictly tied to the topic of avant-gardes, i.e., the stairs are seen as a growing process, which – as Hejduk observes – takes us from the horizontal to the vertical, from the plane to the wall: “Have you ever read the article on the Malaparte House? That has something to do with your question. This is the beginning of it all. From the horizontal to the vertical. Abstract”¹⁷. The transition from the horizontal to the vertical is to be found both in the process that leads to the invention of the Wall House and in the legend of the “sacred mountain”, which represents the home of the bond between heaven and earth¹⁸.

In Klee’s *Theory of Art and Figuration* (1956) or in the “Architectural Paintings” of Wladyslaw Strzeminski – who together with Katarzyna Kobro gave birth to Unism, one of the most interesting avant-gardes of the 1920’s in Poland and Europe – (organic) growth occurs starting from a corner until it gradually occupies the entire field. In the mausoleum for his friend and art critic Max Dvořák and in the basement of the project for the new Chicago Tribune headquarters Loos designs a stepped roof. The steps rise gradually from the rhythmic structure of the entire façade, in which the gradient of growth is given by the overlap and difference between two rhythms, the height of the plinth divided by 6 and divided by 5. This metric unit becomes the measure that articulates the relationship between tread (1x) and rise (2x) of the steps of the roof¹⁹ (Ill. 10, 11, 12, 13).

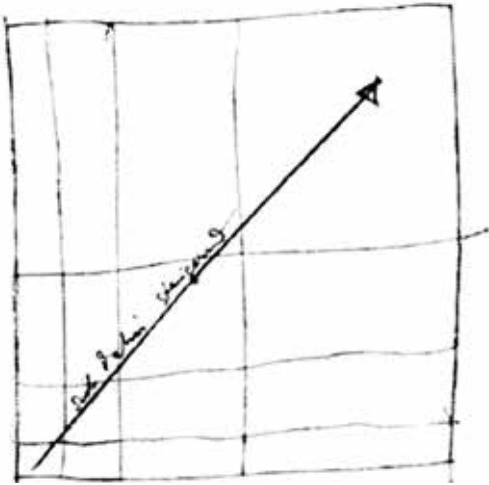
The basement of the Chicago Tribune is topped by a Doric column. Two successive inversions (top/bottom, large/small) transform the skyscraper into a bridge building within which the column can take on the role of an elevator or a water pump as needed.

¹⁶ *Un gatto che alza la coda* is a drawing by Gigetta Tamaro made in 2008 for a design workshop at the IUAV of Venice. The drawing is published in the catalogue of the exhibition “*tu mi sposerai*”. *Opere di Gigetta Tamaro*, edited by L. Semerani, Marsilio, Venice 2017. In the catalogue, the drawing accompanies the “La scala: punti di vista” text.

¹⁷ J. Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

¹⁸ See L. Amistadi, *L’architettura del gioco*, [in:] E. Mucelli, S. Rössl (ed.) *Esperienze dell’architettura*, LetteraVentidue, Syracuse 2022 (currently being published).

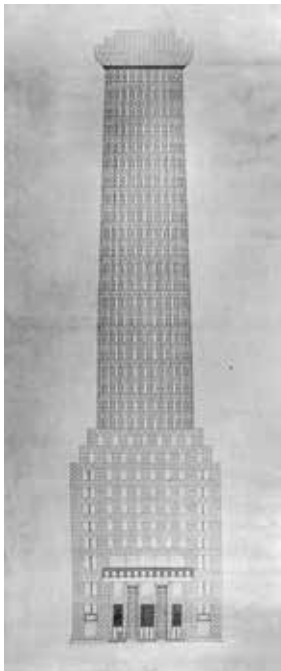
¹⁹ See L. Amistadi, *Ornament and Play*, [in:] L. Amistadi, I. Clemente (ed.), *Adolf Loos. Soundings 2/II*, Aión, Florence 2022 (currently being published).



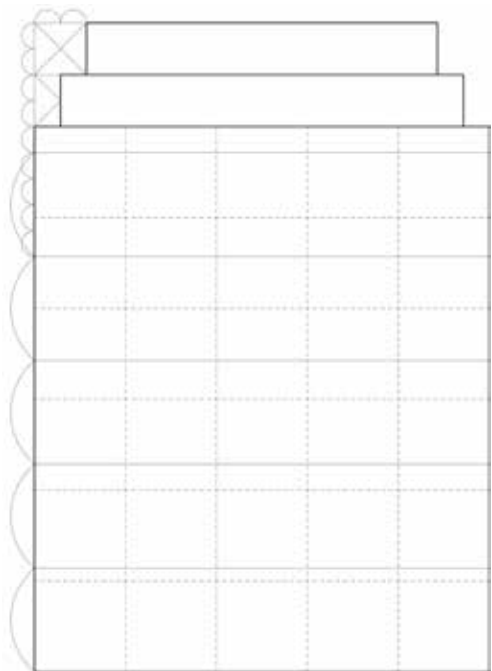
Ill. 10. Paul Klee, Secondary movement on the basis of the square – progressive increase (two-dimensional), from *Theory of Art and Figuration*, 1956.



Ill. 11. Władysław Strzemiński, Architectural Composition 9c, 1929.

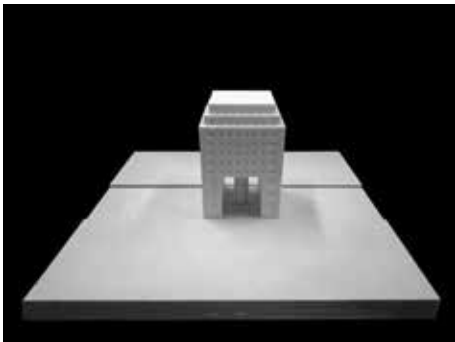


Ill. 12. Adolf Loos, Chicago's Tribune Tower Competition, 1922.

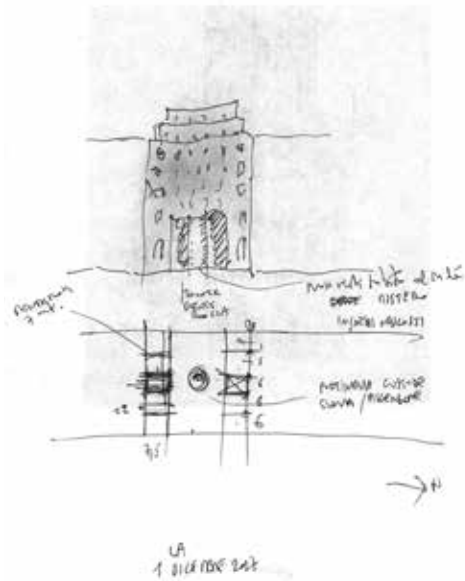


Ill. 13. Lamberto Amistadi, Proportional diagram of the basement of the Chicago Tribune, 2022.

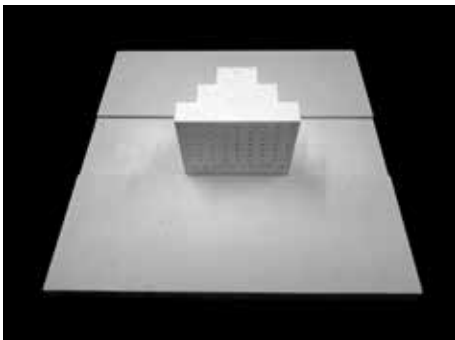
As with Hejduk's little theaters, the transfiguration alters to some extent the topological universe of the building, in which the two arms are arranged according to a prevailing direction. A further kind of inversion, in its own way again suggested by Hejduk, is one whereby the stepped form of the section becomes the design of the plan, and more generally, the form of the section is reversed into the form of the plan. I am not sure if this is a Dada operation, but certainly the variation of type (in this case) and of the fundamental topological relations (above/below, front/back, right/left) produce the estrangement necessary to bring us back into the atmosphere of the avant-garde: the façade presses against the field boundary for its full width and the position of the figure in relation to the background is articulated in a whole range of options (Ill. 14, 15, 16, 17).



Ill. 14. Lamberto Amistadi, Figurative variation of the basement of the Chicago Tribune, 2017. Model.



Ill. 15. Lamberto Amistadi, Figurative variation of the basement of the Chicago Tribune, 2017. Sketch.



Ill. 16. Lamberto Amistadi, Figure 11, 2018. Model.



Ill. 17. Lamberto Amistadi, Figure 11, 2018. Sketch.

5. CONCLUSION

The relationship between typological invariance and topological variation is perhaps the most interesting feature of a “figurative turn” that takes very little account of the functional dimension, or at least, according to which the functional program turns out to be rather flexible and masks can take on different roles and perform different tasks within the city. The goal of the tasks entrusted to architecture continues to be the intelligibility of the city (understood as a work of art), which can be achieved only by clarifying and strengthening its internal relations through the enhancement of its figurative (and narrative) structure.

When Gianugo Polesello recalls Wittgenstein’s well-known statement on leverage:

I wonder: why not compare the possible positions of the individual elements that Wittgenstein talked about with regard to the knob or with regard to the rod that becomes a lever, with the question of possible positions in architecture? The fifth proposition is that a building is a part of a city. In this sense it seems to me that the Aymonino concept of a part of a city as a piece becomes more intelligible. You can make references to military art: the artillery piece; or to the game of chess: the chess piece. I am more interested in making a piece as an element of a machine in operation,²⁰

he is referring precisely to the work which each individual architect performs in the city. This work will be done in accordance with the rules proper to the figure itself so that “the same proposition (the structure regulated by internal relationships which report to the logical properties of symbols) can be treated, first, as a proposition to be controlled by experience and second, as a rule of control”²¹. This means that instructions can have no predictive value and each subsequent move (Übergang) requires a new decision: “between the sign and its application there is a gap that must be spanned by a bridge that we must build ourselves”²². What is for sure is that the figure (like the eight variants proposed by le Corbusier for the Palace of Soviets in Moscow that Polesello uses to illustrate Wittgenstein’s proposition) contains within itself its own figurations, which are immanent and autonomous, independent of any context and any external reference, that is, of any representation. In this sense they remove us from the indeterminacy of the infinite (of infinite possibilities) and construct and realize their own field of possibilities according to their own “life form” (*Lebensform*).

Not only do the figures or pieces arrange themselves on the board according to the different combinations which their nature allows, but it is the board itself which is involved in the interplay of variations. The figures not only work at a distance (just like artillery pieces), but their grammar articulates the design of the background (ground) on which they are arranged. This is certainly a fundamental legacy of the avant-garde, namely that the form of the background actively participates in the work of the figure: Hejduk associates the square shape of the canvas with abstract painting and the rectangular shape with cubism. In *Il Divenire delle Arti*, Gillo Dorfles points out how “each of its parts [of the painted canvas] acquires its property as a sign; so that we should no longer conceive of an object – albeit abstract, imaginary – immersed in an amorphous, neutral surface that serves it only as a support; but should also assign a protagonist role to such surface as well”²³. In a well-written book on

²⁰ G. Polesello, *L'architettura in funzione*, [in:] P. Grandinetti (ed.), *La geometria in funzione nell'architettura e nella costruzione della città*, Cluva, Venezia 1985, p. 10.

²¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Della Certezza*, Einaudi, Torino 1978, §98.

²² L. Wittgenstein cit. in A.G. Gargani, *Wittgenstein. Musica, parola, gesto, op. cit.*, p. 104.

²³ G. Dorfles, *Il divenire delle arti*, Einaudi, Torino 1976, p. 110.

avant-gardes (cubism, the abstract painting of Mondrian and Barnett-Newmann’s minimalist art) Yve-Alain Bois goes a step further and speaks of *Painting as Model*, i.e., of an artistic form that becomes a syntactic paradigm. He introduces the idea of painting as a strategic (and technical) model, distinguishing between a projective-representational plane and a symbolic plane, recalling in this regard one of Benjamin’s youthful insights: “We could say that the substance of the world is crossed by two sections: the longitudinal section of painting, and the cross section of certain forms of drawing. The longitudinal section would seem to have a representative function and in some way contains things; the cross section is symbolic: it contains the signs”. Alain-Bois maintains that a number of European and American minimalist abstract art masterpieces, but also Picasso’s *papier collé*, “belong to certain forms of drawing” and have value as a technical, symbolic and above all strategic model: “Like chess pieces, like phonemes in language, a work has significance, as Lévi-Strauss shows, first by what it is not and what opposes, that is, in each case according to its position, its value, within a field – itself living and stratified – which has above all to be circumscribed by defining its rules”²⁴.

It is precisely this strategic and syntactic turning point which we really need in order to reconfigure the conditions of rarefaction and indeterminacy in which the contemporary city swirls. What we really need, in other words, is an architecture able to construct its own reasons for settlement by itself.

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²⁴ I.-A. Bois, *Painting as Model*, The Mit Press, Cambridge–London 1993, pp. 253, 254.

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A u t h o r ' s N o t e :

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Lamberto Amistadi is an architect and an Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Bologna – Cesena Campus and the Coordinator of the ArchéA program (<https://site.unibo.it/archea/en>). He is the deputy director of the scientific journal FAMagazine, devoted to research and projects concerning architecture and the city (<https://www.famagazine.it>), and co-director of the series TECA, *Teorie della Composizione architettonica* (Naples: Clean). Along with Ildebrando Clemente, he founded and directs the series SOUNDINGS: *Theory of Architectural Openness* (Florence: Aión), which has included monographic volumes on John Hejduk, Aldo Rossi and Adolf Loos. He is also the author of the book *La costruzione della città* (Padua: Il Poligrafo) and numerous publications.

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