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ARCHITECTURE AND HUMAN IDENTITY - ARTISTIC SUSTAINABILITY

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Architecture and Human Identity – Artistic Sustainability

Synopsis:

The best measures for the environmental improvement of the city involve not only sustainability meant as balance between ecology and biological systems (however desirable at global scale), but we must also focus on the possibility in architecture to improve the research about artistic sustainability. Creativity is a specific capability of humans and the relationship between creativity and architecture is present right from the early stages of the design process regardless of the scale.

Architecture and Human Identity – Artistic Sustainability

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Keywords: Collective Identity; Migrant Images, Human Birth Theory, Universal Exposition.



Figure1. Nanjing Tulou - Fujian, China - October 2011.

Contemporary China between the revival of the traditional collective identity and the search for the new in architecture.

The quality of the relationship between human beings and architecture in Chinese cities and in the International context has become possible not only due to the dialogue between goods and traditions but also due to the exchange between the diversity found in the social transformation of its cities and acceptance of the urban city organism as it changes. The city can be thought of as a fusion of the cultural differences and multi-layered identities. This fusion surpasses the existing ideas of national, religious, ethnic, ethical and economic identity forming the dynamic complexities of contemporary societies, where the meeting points between different cultures are evident. This phase of modernity represents a new global scenario solely projected towards the next generation of architecture. It is a declaration of change looking to the future. The current architectural landscapes of China¹, in fact, present a challenge to the migrant images of architects of all nationalities who, upon arriving in a new architectural culture, face the unfortunate reality of the decreasing awareness of the importance of creativity within the realm of urban design.

¹ *Various Authors, Masterplanning the Future. Modernism: East, West & Across the World, The Proceedings of an International Conference held at Xi'an Jiatong – Liverpool University, October 2012, Suzhou, PR China. Edited by Williams, A., Dounas, T.*

The construction boom in China is not an isolated case in the international arena but rather it is a region of experimentation on a global scale. This cultural encounter between civilization at architectural level has led to the alteration of the urban fabric which has been paralleled in the social sphere, and has also allowed architectural experimentation to gain new impetus, thereby generating an accelerated process with respect to other urbanized areas of the world. The shift from the first to the second urbanization² involved urban centres with smaller territorial dimensions and there was a switch from iconographic architecture with great impact, aimed at representing Chinese economic power, to urban works covering large areas still under construction. The territory is subject to violent urbanization with no architectural identity, as occurred in Italy after the Second World War. The large works that have been built in the last decade are still linked to a Postmodern vision of creating architecture as, in the rendering of the construction, they reproduce symbolic figures borrowed from reality without proposing original images. Fortunately some works are distinguished by taking inspiration from the “unfinished calligraphy” typical of Chinese art, for example Mad Studio and the work of Steven Holl. The traditions of ancient Chinese architecture and art are infused with new European technology which is applied and thus incorporated into the creation of new architecture and constructions.

The work of Wang Shu³ more than any other represents the condition of architecture in China between tradition and the cultural relationship with the West. For example in the Museum of Ningbo the poetic use of recycled materials and the construction techniques in relation to reinforced concrete describe the tension between the revival of the past and modernity. Chinese contemporary art suggests a key to understanding the moment. The sculptural works, installations and paintings do not stop with the usual definition of “fake” icons, but this – which the artists describe very well – is still a hybrid phase between the East and the West, it is a phase of reconstruction and research. The hyperrealist faces of many Chinese works in the art galleries from Beijing to Guangzhou, and even in Italy, demonstrate the sense of a deformation of human proportions, they appear as burnt materials, giant Buddhas, for example in the works of contemporary artists such as Zhang Huan, Yue Minjun, Liu Ye, Tian Xi, Jiang Jie and many others they confirm that successfully satisfying the needs of the immense Chinese population is only enough for dignified survival, but the Human Identity⁴ of each individual requires more.

³ *Research on Contemporary Architecture in China Published in the International Journal of Management and Humanities. Volume 1- Issue 7 Published on 15 April 2015 - Architecture and Human Identity – F. Serri, Architect.*

⁴ *Fagioli, M., Il Coraggio delle immagini, Nuove Edizioni Romane, Roma 1996, Istinto di Morte e Conoscenza, L'asino D'oro Edizioni, 2010*

Expo 2015, Milan, Italy

To draw on the contemporary nature of our research I refer to the Milanese Expo event currently in progress where the Chinese presence is one of the most important not only for the commercial investments made but also due to the number of visitors expected from China. Philippe Starck⁵ recently stated that the topic of the Expo no longer served any purpose and of the many reasons for this he emphasized the fact that the great scientific discoveries of the 1900s that were so revolutionary also had a material aspect to reveal, while today the large and expensive pavilions have nothing more to say. The formula of the Expo⁶ as an event for commercial exchanges between countries is now outdated and not very proactive in terms of the relationship between architecture and creativity, but in my opinion the legacy of the Universal Expositions⁷, in history, has been the slow process towards a utopian global democracy.

For example, with the Universal Exposition in Shanghai in 2010, China officially opened up to the West with an irreversible stream of changes and relations starting with the 2008 Olympic Games, which was still deeply rooted in international exchanges⁸ initiated at least four centuries ago. Walking in the streets of Beijing in August 2008 and during the Expo of 2010 one had the sense of an important historical moment in time. Let us hope that the imminent Italian Universal Exposition is not only a gastronomic and business exchange; let us hope for something more than the umpteenth sponsoring of the superficial and standardized image of Made in Italy to feed the so-described nouveau riche from China. Trivialization empties things of content and removes the poetry from thought as the encounter between cultural differences, which has always been the driving force behind great achievements in the history of Humanity, here seems to be reduced to a standard commercial investment. In Italy there are a great many Chinese communities, for example the city of Prato⁹, close to Florence, is home to one of the largest communities of Chinese immigrants; in the past this town was the seat of important exchanges with the Ancient East. Today this widespread presence and remarkable cultural richness is still ignored by many or only exploited without any research; but here we could painfully digress on the reality of emigration and its tragedies, whatever ethnicity they belong to.

Italy is much loved not only in China¹⁰ but throughout the world, perhaps for that sense of poetry and elegance that has distinguished us Italians and on which we construct a national identity, but

⁵ Video interview with Philippe Starck: "The Expo no longer serves any purpose". 21/04/2015

⁶ Here in reference to the article that appeared in "Il Venerdì di Repubblica" dated 24 April 2015. *Tourists not by chance. Letter written to the Editorial Department of the newspaper.*

⁷ *The legacy of the Expositions, Giuseppe Turchini, Archetipo, August 2010*

⁸ *Filippi Pini, M., Italia Cina, 60 anni tra passato e futuro, 2011, L'asino D'oro edizioni s.r.l.*

⁹ *Ivan Marzocco - Guided tour of the settlement area and integration of the Chinese Communities in Prato - August 2009*

¹⁰ *Clément Dagada "Dans la ville chinoise, regards sur les mutations d'un empire", 9 June 2008 Introduction to the exhibition, Dans La ville chinoise, Palais de Chaillot, Paris, 18 June 2008 - 19 September 2008*

today national identity for us and for all nationalities is no longer enough to describe the human identity and its complexities, clearly more complex and articulated answers are sought. In the newspapers Italians read reports that speak of commercial greed in relation to the imminent event and all this has made me think of the Expositions throughout history and the innovation in architecture at the various Expos. Because in architecture humans experiment with life. Architecture is movement in the sense of psychological movement¹¹; it is art, research and creativity. It is a massive challenge as it creates relationships between people so I think we should bear in mind the need, even in this sector, for artistic and not only commercial sustainability. The idea of a cultural encounter has always been a significant element even when innovation in architecture was lacking in various editions of the Expo. Here I list just some of the pavilions that made the history of architecture; we wish the originals could still be visited. The street dedicated to “L’histoire de L’habitation” commissioned by Charles Garnier for the Expo of 1889 where there was also a reconstruction of a Chinese house situated right at the base of the Eiffel Tower, which was inaugurated on that occasion and along with it the future relationship between artificial electric lighting, the city and architecture. Paris 1925, the Soviet pavilion by Konstantin Melnikov inspired by the researches of Russian Constructivism; the exhibition space of the pavilion was cut in two by a diagonal path and the scenic movement in the architecture interrupted leading the artistic innovation of the Avant-garde artists to the design of the space. 1929, the sets by Lilly Reich, collaborator of Mies Van der Rohe at the Barcelona event. Paris 1937, Guernica by Pablo Picasso was displayed in the Spanish pavilion. Oscar Niemeyer in 1939 and Lucio Costa, for the World Trade Fair of New York, with the Brazilian pavilion represented the future shift from the modern movement to the Postmodern period. The urban interventions from Paris to London and Shanghai. Brussels 1958, the Philips Pavilion by Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis, where the envelope with structural shells anticipated today's architecture by 40 years. Seattle 1962, the Space Needle which became the icon of the American city, and in Seville in 1992 the new technological applications led to the concept of green sustainability applied to architecture. At the Italian Expo there is no innovation in architecture but rather an eclectic fusion between different periods, deconstructivism overlaps the postmodern and a neo-rationalism without purity defines most of the pavilions. The Vanke Pavilion designed by Libeskind brings us back to the previous discussion on the period China is experiencing. The concept of nature present in Chinese art for many centuries has been represented as a high-tech blob building, with no scaly image folded back on itself and decorated with the iconography of Chinese art, an architecture still hybrid between tradition and contemporary trends highly representative of the international context.

¹¹ Fagioli, M.: *A.Y from 2002 to 2012, University of Chieti. Psychology*

Utopistically speaking I think more research is required to restore to architectural practice a greater relationship with human specificity and namely irrational thought¹², the thinking that art originates from which has given rise to many masterpieces by humanity, from wall art made by women to the futuristic architecture that will soon doubtless be constructed in China.

The condition of architecture in China is not a special case to be studied as a phenomenon that only forms part of a national framework, but it is an example of a global crisis that fortunately, in recent years, has shifted towards the sensitive redevelopment of architecture.¹³ The transformation of human thought¹⁴ is the main driver of new social change which is then reflected through architecture.

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¹² Fagioli, M., *Il Pensiero Nuovo, Lezioni 2004, 2012, L'asino d'oro Edizioni.*

¹³ *This publication is a summary of research conducted for the Urban Affairs Association Conference, March 2014, San Antonio, Texas. U.S.A. Written for MPTF Conference, October 2012, Suzhou, China.*

¹⁴ *Human Birth Theory, M. Fagioli; www.lasinodoroedizioni.it.*

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