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TAKING A POSITION

Ralf F. Broekman and Olaf Winkler in conversation
with Antonino Cardillo

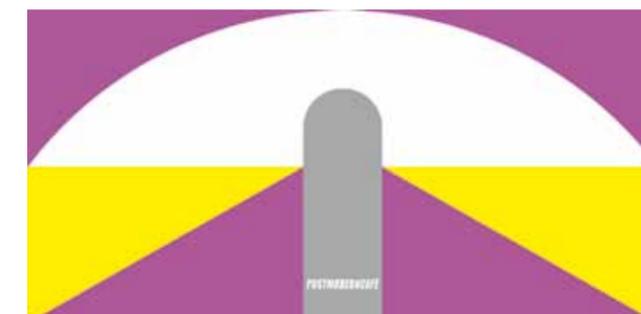
Antonino Cardillo, you have become known especially for projects of rather small scale. How important is this specific typology of projects for your architectural concepts and general thinking?

The most revolutionary pieces of architecture of the modern age have been small buildings: a house of red brick, a pavilion made of slabs of marble, a square villa suspended on pilotis, a house on a waterfall, a deformed chapel, and a town hall at Säynätsalo. In the 60s, a grey house that seemed like a giant broken tympanum called rationalist dogmas into question. And then again in the 80s, a Canadian architect raised debate in the architectural world by dotting Los Angeles with ready-made houses. Small scale brings freedom and often small budgets offer great possibilities for experiment. For this reason, too, I design houses.

The last time we talked with you, you emphasized that architecture does not have to rely on precious materials or costly furniture. Nevertheless, your works certainly reflect a specific elegance. How would you define elegance, maybe also luxury?

I believe in elegance, but not luxury. I think they are two opposing visions. Elegance is the visual manifestation of a personal state of quest. Pursuing it is vain. It is just the external result of an interior elaboration. Ascetics, artists, those curious about life are elegant. Luxury is bought and sold, it is an apparent shortcut that reveals itself – to keen eyes – as a tragic parody of elegance. Luxurious architecture, therefore, is an oxymoron.

Postmodern Café, design for a temporary café for the exhibition "Postmodernism. Style and Subversion 1970–1990" at the V&A Museum, London, England, design 2011



antonino cardillo



Echoes, entertainment centre for Trapani, Italy, design 2001 (above)

Nomura 24 House, Takarazuka, Japan, 2010 (r.)

The way you deal with space, the mentioned kind of elegance, the appearance of your work, underlined by the way it is presented in images, could be considered a very personal style. How important is a personal language, a signature, style – as an outcome of the way you think about architecture, but also as a means of distinction within the architecture market?

In 2002, with my degree thesis “Let There Be More Light”, I experimented for the first time with the discretization of double-curved NURBS surfaces. Between 2007 and 2011 I designed seven houses of cement, travertine, and wood. Then, designing a small temporary shop for Sergio Rossi, I got to know a different, more inclusive direction. Today, designing the Postmodern Café for the Victoria and Albert Museum, I experiment with a chromaticity that is new in my works, a palette of hypersaturated colours inspired by those of computers of the 80s. I am not interested in the recognizability of my work, I think it is an artistic limitation, a problem of commercial order.

You talked about the relevance of small-scale projects. How interesting would it be for you to concentrate on bigger projects, to turn to a bigger scale? Where do you see the major challenges within urban spaces, especially with regard to the concept of the European City, which is still so much connected to the image of historical Italian cities, on the one hand, and new global, social and political developments affecting city growth and limitations in city planning on the other?

The city is an unpredictable organism that auto-generates over time, constructed from visible and invisible networks of signs and meanings. Architecture can influence the growth of a city, but when it goes beyond a certain dimension, when the architecture imposes a plan, the city sickens. In Tokyo and Osaka order and chaos coexist: a multiplicity of different systems stratify time and space, constructing the best possible modernity. By contrast, the new Chinese cities, even glimpsed from above, appear as ideal models of lifelessness. The architecture is a desire for order, and therefore for death. It is order even when it would appear to be disordered. Often it begins where life finishes, and beyond a certain dimension it becomes fascism.





Purple House, Pembrokeshire,
Wales, 2011



antonino cardillo (3)



How do you judge, in this sense, the growing number of “iconographic” buildings, which also means the growing demand for individuality in architecture in general and for rather spectacular, expressive buildings in particular?

Long ago, humanity celebrated the mystery of creation constructing large houses for invisible magic beings called gods. Architecture transfigured trees and stones into something grandiose and communicative. It was a universal language, like music, and in its logic the most ancient traditions were stratified. That pre-modern architecture celebrated power and was based on ignorance and the submission of the majority of human beings. In the West, with the advent of the modern era, humanity seemed to free itself from centuries-old powers and a new architecture discovered in modernity new energies and a fresh *raison d'être* in history. But at the end of the 80s with the fall of the USSR – the paradoxical buttress of Western democracies – something changed. For decades we have witnessed the concealed reversion of society to a pre-modern condition and architecture has recorded this mutation. Behind the proliferation of a multitude of iconic neo-modern buildings lurks a sadistic manipulation: an immense well of ideas, passions, civil wars, and ideals constantly ransacked and abused shamelessly by the media. Original meanings are altered, rewritten or erased. Thus, manipulated to the point of lobotomization, the modern becomes innocuous, an image, a cruel and grotesque mask that indistinctly celebrates dictatorship and consumerism.

Do these thoughts include a reflection on the status of the architect, of architecture as a discipline as such? How do you deal with the dissolving borders of the discipline, opening up to-



Concrete Moon House, Melbourne, Australia, 2009 (l.)

Nude Tower, Rome, Italy, design 2007 (r.)

wards product design as well as other cultural disciplines, maybe also science, politics, etc.? Would you consider yourself conservative in this sense?

Architecture in democracy, beyond a certain scale, should dissolve itself into collective participation. Perhaps it is not the case that cities like New York be built of invisible, anonymous architectures. When the variables, the parts, the actors and users are many, it is desirable that architecture disappears, but I believe it is just as important to reflect on whatever directions are opportune to make architecture disappear. Every time architecture gives way to the dictates of consumerism and productivity, building remains an act of imperialism, and thus anti-democratic. It would be desirable if architecture disappeared into democratic participation, into respect for places, anthropological values and the history of the landscape. And after decades, this great challenge comes back into currency today thanks to participation from the ground up made possible by social networks.

In fact, you are publicly present not only through built architecture, but also through contributions to magazines, writing on architecture. How do you judge the current situation for an open exchange and public debate on architecture?

There is fear within us, and that which we don't accept in others is often a reflection of our character. Re-reading my articles of criticism, I happened to discover that in truth I was merely criticizing myself. Without the exercise of criticism, without taking a position, without conflicts – which are often also internal – there is no creation. But criticism is in the process of becoming extinct in the pages of magazines. The press celebrates the system or becomes itself the system and, in doing so, regresses into vulgar entertainment.

Antonino Cardillo was born in Erice, Sicily, in 1975 and studied architecture in Palermo. Having trained there under Antonietta Iolanda Lima (architect, critic, and historian of architecture and urbanism), Cardillo founded his own practice for architecture, interior design, and urban design in Rome in 2004. Since then, he has gained prominence with projects which often combine a monolithic appearance and sculptural traits. In 2009 Antonino Cardillo was selected as one of the 30 best new young architectural practices from around the world in Wallpaper Magazine's Architects Directory. His works were exhibited at different occasions, including the 4th International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam 2009/2010; lately he has been working with the London Design Festival and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. www.antoninocardillo.com

