

MANIFESTO

On archetypes, continuity and innovation...

*"We build atop of the past, itself built atop of the previous past."
(Adolf Loos, Ornament and Crime, 1913)*

To explicitly address archetypes, to situate our production in connection to these references, is our way to produce progress in opposition to novelty. Progress retains an idea of connection, a link with what is there or was there. References allow us to connect with this given material, its historical ambitions and multiple symbolisms, to explore and understand their relational aspects and its potential.

By playing with references, we are continuously balancing between the archetype and the prototype, between the well known and the unknown. This back and forth is at the core of our method. Avoiding the tabula rasa ideology of modernism or the literality of post-modernism, this attitude feeds on contemporary issues. Now conscious of the limits of too fast and unbalanced "newness", it proposes a slow, observing and careful posture on how to imagine what will be built atop of our environment, a quiet and meaningful innovation.

On classical tools vs. experiments and repetition...

Our production is deeply rooted in reality and, per se, presents a tangible, un-inevitable "built" nature. This assertion is valid at every step of a project's development, from the very first sketch to its final materialisation. These various steps can be seen as one continuous chain of material outcomes all connected thanks to their physical existence. Once established, this method allows considering

on the same plan a drawing and, say, a brick wall.

The compulsive application of classic architectural tools to our everyday production, whether representative-based or constructive-based, provides a stable, repetitive method which, far from being restrictive, gives us the freedom to focus on what really matters that is to research and experiment. Their accumulation, redundancy, repetition leads to their improvement ("l'œuvre lente"), the progressive structuring of the architectural process around the idea of "constants vs. variables" along with the refinement of its related agenda.

In time, it results in an accumulation of consistent material progressively highlighting the obsessions of our practise and defining its language: geometrical systems of regulation and representation, carefully crafted drawings, painting-like collages, meticulous details, scale one-to-one mock-ups and prototypes... Beyond its practical austerity, this methodology speaks of avoiding all "immediacy" and, on the contrary, our will to anchor ourselves in all humility to centuries of accumulated knowledge.

On context, potentials and negotiation...

*"The context (... is...) everything that is the case."
(Wittgentsein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1921)*

"Architecture is a knowledge to read and decode, and a technique by which to formalize and encode contexts." (Baukuh, San Rocco magazine, Fuck Concepts! Context!, 2012)

All our projects emphasise a contextual approach rather than a conceptual one. They are dealing with the given. Their strategies and gestures are all based on the reading and decoding of "everything that is the case", i.e. seeing all tangible and intangible parameters as potentials upon which articulate decisions to generate the final outcome.

This approach blurs the traditional distinction between new and old, figure and background, object and context, etc., which is so often seen as purely antagonistic in architecture. Given and new are put on the same plane of importance, feeding one another in a perpetual process of input/output progressively defining spatial, tectonic, formal and material articulations.

If most of the projects invade the given, their new elements articulate (or negotiate) with pre-existing ones; their vocabulary is sometimes reminiscent of it, often paying tribute to archetypal solutions or literally reproducing perceptive aspects such as patterns, textures, colours or morphologies. As much as the result is radical in many ways, it is in fact playing with the possibility of becoming one with its context, ultimately seeking to merge rather than oppose.

On program, functionality and appropriation...

"The experience of La Tourette ultimately lies in the unresolvable contradictions of its character, which is extremely functional yet extremely formal. And yet these functional spaces are constantly contrasted by the most enigmatic formal compositions, which are autonomous and self-referential, devoid of any relationship to the way the building is inhabited."

(Pier Vittorio Aureli & Maria S. Giudici, Indifference and absorption of architectural form: Notes on Le Corbusier's La Tourette Monastery, San Rocco magazine, Indifference, 2013)

As practitioners, we are not dealing with an unshakable set of rules. On the contrary, our method is defined by "the exploration of archetypes and the application of classical tools through an experimental approach" and that very oscillation between stability and instability has been fuelling our reflection on the relation between space, user and program.

When it comes to this relation, the challenge lies in the positioning of the project on in-between multiple contradicting poles: defined vs. undefined, closed vs. open system, passive vs. active, definitive vs. adaptable, finished vs. non-finished, etc. And as much as this sounds like an irresolvable equation there are means and architectural strategies that could actually absorb these terms and therefore propose alternative typologies.

The main one is related to the notions of functionalism vs. functionality, summed up as a "must do" vs. "can do" polarity. The first suggests a tight and almost univocal relation between the various design considerations and the program performed or intended to be performed, leaving very little room for the interpretation of canons inherently non-questionable. The second refers to the capability and suitability of architecture to provide the conditions allowing a program to be performed, leaving room for a relative indifference (whether formal, aesthetical, typological, etc.) regarding the way these conditions are provided.

From flexibility achieved by sheer emptiness or the establishment of rigid grid systems to the potential deconstruction/reconstruction, if not simply unbuilt nature of entire parts, the progressive establishment of an "open-ended/systemic" approach on the program is readable in our projects. As we cannot foresee everything, we have to accept, for the sake of functionality and durability, the User's involvement, understanding and appropriation of the outcome and eventually make it part of the very conception process.

On materiality, construction and expressive austerity...

The above logics have spatial/formal consequences but also inform constructive and material decisions. Our projects rely on their contextualisation, rationality, pragmatism and performances (as devices) to define their vocabulary. They mostly deploy generic/off-the-shelf elements and low-tech, effective methods. They emphasise the projects' construction or deconstruction/reconstruction process by revealing connections, structures and unfinished surfaces but also more abstract ideas as mimetic strategies or hijack/reinvention of proprietary components. Construction techniques are based on local craftsmanship, skills and available materials; we compose with what is there in terms of construction that we ultimately see as a part of the intangible context of a project.

But as strong or expressive the result is, it is part of a larger approach on how to deal with space and materiality which deals with both the idea of economy of means and the establishment of a narrative on how things were done. Our projects are very "material" and explicit from the start,

avoiding at all cost any decorative "finishing" layer that would hide away a lack of care in the implementation of basic elements. The proper materialisation and articulation between these elements is a prominent aspect of the design, much more than any abstract idea or concept. The resulting aesthetic, intentionally at the crossroad of mannerist canons and the banal, is more a consequence than a celebration of any economical paradigm even if it has so far been relevant in that field too. Interestingly, and maybe a bit paradoxically, this strategy allows for radical and varied proposals, yet always consistent whatever the typology, scale or intention. In short, the gestures are strong but the means are basic. We like to call this approach "expressive austerity".

On (cultural) sustainability, archaeology and adaptive-reuse...

*"Demolition is an act of violence"
(Oliver Wainwright, 'Demolition is an act of violence': the architects reworking buildings instead of tearing them down, The Guardian, 2022)*

Recently, architecture and design critic Oliver Wainwright wrote an article in the Guardian entitled "Demolition is an act of violence": the architects reworking buildings instead of tearing them down". This is something we strongly believe in. Adaptive-reuse is becoming a vital necessity to our industry and a key notion when it comes to "cultural sustainability" that is not only reducing carbon footprint and material impact (a must that should not even be mentioned in fact) but also preserving the essence of our cities. All our adaptive-reuse projects emphasise the articulation between the pre-existing and the new with a

penchant for layering and articulating elements within a kind of architectural bricolage deploying as less means as possible.

This approach is expressed in what could be described as an “imaginative” archaeology of the found-spaces that is a mix of rigor and creativity, made out of both exposure and potential accretion, simultaneously scraping back and imagining adding on. It always starts with a process of documentation and exploration of the building’s original architecture and wider context, an inventory of the traces or scars from its past. The building’s actual state interests us, not with a view to returning it to its original condition, it simply doesn’t exist (or is simply irrelevant), but rather of bringing its history forward in time, making it participate in a new reality, literally one layer at a time. It is important here to emphasise the importance of still being able to “read” these layers. By invoking the material and socio-cultural history of the original building, by respecting its tangible and intangible aspects and using them as a base to reframe all future actions, an adaptive-reuse project could deploy a narrative of uncommon richness and intensity.

On being critical, establishing lists and values...

“Traumnovelle is a militant faction. Traumnovelle uses architecture and fiction as analytical, critical and subversive tools to emphasize contemporary issues and dissect their resolutions. Traumnovelle alternates between cynicism and enthusiasm all the while advocating for critical thinking in architecture.”

(Traumnovelle, Introduction to lectures, since 2012)

Critical thinking and deconstruction of situations is necessary when considering our contemporary issues. We simply cannot reduce our profession to a knowledge about what to build and how to build it. We should not be afraid to describe, assess, criticise specific terms or notions. The more we verbalise, the clearer our posture and agenda.

What about...

- Minimalism: it’s fake, it hides, it covers...
- Concept: we don’t need “ideas”; everything is there, under our eyes...
- Design: it tries too much; it’s forced, useless, talkative...
- Technology: we need to reduce our dependence, question its useless complexity, question our needs in general...
- Metaphor: architecture is never a metaphor (aka “your building will never be like a cloud”)...
- Artificiality: architecture is an articulation of space and materials...
- Luxury: we need to be economical, ecological, sociological, in short political...
- Climax: we should not be afraid of being boring...
- Hyper-Design: we should oppose to it an “open-ended” logic...
- Virtuosity: no form making (for the sake of it), no iconism...

If we respect our values, our architecture needs to be honest, contextual, relevant, open-ended, elemental, low-tech, spatial, material, ecological and economical.