Milan

a latex sheet.

r.marcaccio

The very question of a specific "cultural-historical context" in which architecture has to be accommodated puzzled me, especially because it seemed to imply a rather abstract & unsatisfying definition of architectural history as a comprehensive account of all the world's buildings, or of all the ways in which different cultures have built their shelters.

Then, almost accidentally, I reversed the terms came up with a different question: what would it mean to put history into architecture? This simple twist separated architecture from "its cultural-historical context". History now appeared as some sort of prosthetic device to be applied *a posteriori*.

Diller + Scofidio's work at the Biennale of Venice 2008 came to mind. They presented a video which gathered images of all the Venices of the world: the one in Italy, and those which have sprung up in Las Vegas, Tokyo, Nagoya, Macau, and Doha. The subject could visually wander from one to another without being able to distinguish the real Venice from the fake ones. This work suggests that, from a visual/formal point of view, an architectural project can recreate any already existing context. But one might argue that image and form are not enough to replicate the original Venice: its atmosphere is still a missing element.

We might therefore have an architect going to Las Vegas to integrate the fake Venice with a series of technologies and infrastructures which, by altering its climate, could make it more similar to the original one. Thanks to technology, the more intangible conditions of Venice could also be grafted onto a fake city. But not even this "supplementary project" would manage to replicate the original Venice: a further level of complexity exists, one which regards the history of the place, the cultural past, a level that is surely very difficult to recreate.

For the Venice Biennale 2009, Otero Pailos, an artist & architect, coated a pollution-blackened wall of the Doge's Palace with latex, then peeled off the substance after it dried, removing the dirt and leaving a pristine wall behind. The skin-like sheet of latex, with its captured pollution, was exhibited in the Arsenale. It was a record of the city's smoke, industrial exhaust, & accumulated grime: the history of our post-industrial society made "object".

At this point one could imagine transporting the latex sheet to one of the fake Venices around the world and, in so doing, reconstituting the original city in all its aspects. I don't know whether even this would suffice, but undeniably Otero Pailos' operation of "objectification" transfers the "historical-cultural context" into a tangible object, thereby forcing us to picture history as an element of the architectural project (as much as pillars, concrete, glass etc), one that can be controlled, shaped, rearranged and moved in space to achieve specific effects. Amongst others, the effect of some sort of legitimacy, by the very act of insisting upon authentic antiquity.

With all this I don't mean to say that the essence of architectural history necessarily lies in a latex sheet. I'd rather suggest that its role and definition are somewhat "attached" to the architecture. They are therefore as open as the possibilities of the project.

Roberta Marcaccio is a recent graduate of the AA's history & theory masters. She works as a freelance writer & architectural educator.

London

absolute architecture.

p.v.aureli

I always maintain a certain separation between theory & my own projects. I don't want my projects to be an illustration of what I have to say through writing & I don't want my writing to be an apology for my own approach. I think writing is a way to re-engage with history, which I've never seen as a quiet field but as a highly contested one, where we constantly renegotiate the values of the present. In that sense, my research is inclusive & not dogmatic like my design. My design is exclusive & tries to redefine the most generic & abstract properties of architecture.

Paralleled with writing & problematising its precedents, there is an interesting link with abstraction. Abstraction didn't start from scratch. It was a dialectical relationship with the entire precedent of the history of painting. So between my writing & projects there is a moment of discontinuity. I discourage people from reading my projects through my writings. My projects are only readable through their images, the writing problematises context.

Fulcrum: Is there room for ornament in absolute architecture? Ornament has been with architecture from its beginning. For example, the second part of Alberti's *De Re Aedificatoria* is about ornament. For Alberti, it was the dress of architecture, without which architecture would not have its socio-political institutional appearance. In that sense ornament is exactly the sort of system of conventions that we need in order to communicate – it's like how we dress or how we speak – an essential part of our social engagement.

The moment architecture is presented as a social or political form of engagement, ornament becomes inescapable.

You could say that my abstraction & tabula rasa are a form of negative ornament. I'm not making the argument of parametric designers, that whatever they do is always an inevitable product of a certain process. On the contrary, there is a deliberate intention that has a strong will to communicate, not only on the level of function & programme, but on the level of cultural understanding.

Think of Mies' beams on the façade of the Seagram, which he explained rather clumsily as a way to reduce the impact of the wind on the façade. I think it's a form of ornament. He wanted to give depth to the facade to emphasise the plaza in front. A plaza in that kind of building is institutional & social, an almost political manoeuvre. I'm interested in ornament because it's like politics - unavoidable.

A building is always a finite form, it has to take a position within the city, & that position is not only the site or programme, but also the way architects define boundaries that are inevitable when building. Context is important, but I don't use the word. When you tell students to be careful about context, they immediately narrow down their attention a site & its proximities. To me context is subjectivity – that particular place, ethos or a civilisation that might understand the building, that's much more important as a definition than whether a city is dense or not dense, low-rise or high-rise. The subjectivity of Mies makes sense within a late-capitalist American civilisation. A Mies building in another ethos wouldn't have the same meaning. Few understand this dimension.
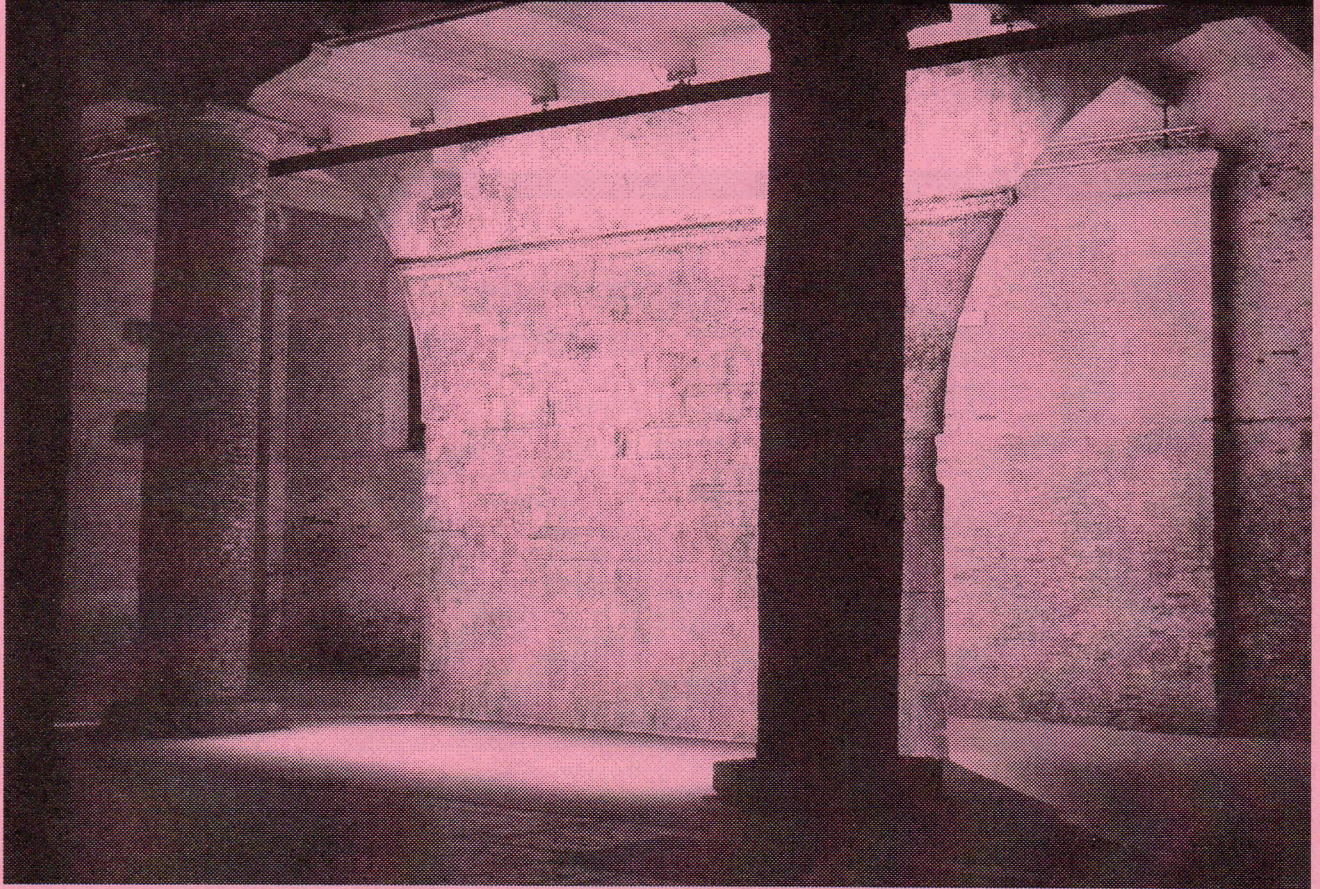
THE ETHICS OF DUST, BY JORGE OTERO-PAILOS. A POLLUTION-BLACKENED WALL OF THE DOGE'S PALACE WAS COATED WITH LATEX, THEN PEELED OFF TO REVEAL A PRISTINE WALL. THE SKIN-LIKE SHEET, WITH ITS CAPTURED POLLUTION, BECOMES BOTH A RECORD OF THE CITY'S GRIME & HISTORY MADE "OBJECT".

FROM THE FRONT:

When most architects talk about the city, it's about morphology, texture, fabric... superficial properties. Not to mention when they build in China or India & they end up with naïve metaphors.

Fulcrum: How do you see projects like the Ordos 100?

I want to refrain myself from being judgemental towards people that are my colleagues, but I think that if it's an act of irony, maybe it could be an interesting experiment! I'm sure that Ai Wei Wei is a very intelligent artist. There is a hidden agenda, which is not exactly what those who have participated understand... it is an allegory of contemporary design, where on the one hand there is an incredible power of expectations, PR & images, which in our economy is fundamental, and then there is the miserable reality of cheap labour. It is emblematic of the political economy of architecture today.

Fulcrum: In the British press architects have been criticised for not standing up for Ai Wei Wei, in the way that other artists & intellectuals have, is that a symptom of contemporary architecture?

There is a mentality that only what is built is considered architecture. This a fundamental misunderstanding – that building automatically becomes architecture. Of course, when architects have as their only goal to build, you cannot step forward & say something that might compromise that. In the case of the disappearance of Ai Wei Wei, it is quite embarrassing. You have all these avant garde architects talking about architecture, space & engagement, then you have an artist imprisoned for his art & they don't know what to do. Maybe it's better that we stay silent all the time! Perhaps that would be a more dignified choice, not to speak all the time & then to remain silent at embarrassing moments.

Fulcrum: Do architects need ideology?

Politics & ideology are inevitable. It is a fate of human kind & it becomes even more pernicious when people try to avoid it. For as long as we have ideas, desires & imagination, these things will crystallise as ideology, whether it is yours or a shared one. What is really crazy is that we are fast in recognising ideologies as social or cultural agendas, but we don't realise that the market is a fundamental form of ideology! It's interesting that when it comes to the market, people shift from talking about ideology to reality. It's not about being ideological or not, but how we deal with issues.

I don't have an ideology in the sense of defining my own, though I share certain values that are not, let's say, fitting with the current political & social condition. I believe in issues like solidarity & class consciousness; the question is how we reinvent a contemporary understanding of these values, which have a

very long & glorious history - but at the present they look quite miserable. Not because of capital, but because of the parties & movements that were supposed to represent these values.

Fulcrum: Can you build a city from scratch?

For me the city is the only meaning in architecture. When you say 'from scratch' you mean where there was once an empty territory, but that city could never be built from zero, because it can only be born from conventions, ideas, a grammar.

In many countries there is a lot of large-scale design going on, but there is no critical discourse that engages with that scale; it's happening without conceptualisation or any attempt to rethink what we can do!

Pier Vittorio Aureli is a Dip 14 tutor. His most recent work is 'The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture' (MIT), and he was interviewed for Fulcrum by Aram Mooradian.