

Enrico Prandi
On the necessity of designing and writing about (one's) project

Abstract

This editorial comments critically on the experience of the journal's first "call for project" alongside the many usual "call for abstracts." It was a positive experience, which brought to light a complementary issue of the project, namely, that of the written explanation of the project process representing a parallel narrative of it. The result, therefore, was an interesting experiment in three respects. The first is inherent in the desire to hold together theory and practice, writing about architecture and making architecture through design as characteristic of a typically Italian approach to architectural design. The second, is that of an exercise of project criticism that in the case of this issue moves from the projects of others (of Masters, colleagues, students) to one's own project. The third, no less important, is to make the project intelligible, thus elevating it to an example of a scientific product of disciplinary research.

Keywords

Theory and praxis – Operational critique – Project as a product of scientific research

As chance would have it, I am writing this article upon my return from the *National Conference of Architectural Design PhDs* organized by ProArch, the scientific society of architectural design teachers that took place in Rome on March 1-2, 2024. This has its importance in that the recipients of the FAM call that make up this issue were precisely the doctoral students, in architecture and not only in architectural design who evidently represent a subset of them. Therefore, the article will inevitably be influenced by the reflections that arose in that debate.

Those who follow FAM know that the journal is wont to delve even methodologically into little-explored if not completely unexplored territories. So that the call in question was the journal's first "call for project," which complements the numerous "calls for abstracts" launched in the past few years. It was a positive experience, that of soliciting design reflections, which brought to light a complementary issue of the project, namely, that of the written explanation of the design process that represents a parallel narrative of it. Being a magazine that publishes scientific articles, we felt it was only fair to make the explanation coincide with the scientific article commenting on the project.

The result, therefore, was an interesting experiment in many ways.

The first is inherent in the desire to hold theory and praxis together, writing about architecture and making architecture through the project as characteristic of a typically Italian approach to architectural design – the reference is to Gregotti's definition of architects born "with a pen in their hand"–. We have, therefore, reversed the terms of the discourse: in this case the project is not commentary on theoretical writing, the usual mechanism of the critical articles of which FAM is almost entirely composed, but it is

the writing that becomes commentary on the project. In designing the Memorial Monument from the five proposed solicitations, in fact, the project team is supposed to have experimented with a reverse, more “operational” procedure similar to what is usually done on the table in the architectural office (at one time it would have been said on the drawing board – drafting table). The novelty lies in the fact that it is intended to give an account of the design operations by means of a writing that allows one to understand the method in its processualities, the reason for the choices (initial, partial or final) and the value of the answers in order to fully understand the resulting form.

On the other hand, if there is a *Theory of Architectural Design* (SAMONÀ 1968) it cannot but manifest itself in the work designed and/or built.

The second, is that of an exercise of design criticism that in the case of this issue moves from the projects of others (of Masters, colleagues, students) to one’s own project carried out in collaboration with a sculptor. An exercise in self-criticism that would impose additional rigor tending toward demonstrativeness and transmissibility, aspects in which FAM has always been interested. Indeed, it is our belief that the exercise of criticism (which includes self-criticism) is a basic act of project growth as well as the foundation of the disciplinary practice of architectural and urban design.

The third, no less important is to make the project intelligible, thus elevating it to an example of a scientific product of disciplinary research. The topic is widely debated especially in the field of architectural design (suffice it to mention that the first issue of the newly founded journal *ProArch Intersections* is devoted precisely to the topic of *The architectural project as a product of scientific research*, AA.VV. 2024). The interest lies in the fact that the intelligibility of the project exists if the accompanying report reveals its main methodological steps. Without such explanation, the project is difficult to evaluate except by entering into the mere evaluation of functional aspects. In order for the project not to be misunderstood in its simplistic formal perception (thus becoming otherwise formalist), it is necessary to “make the design experiment replicable” by allowing its choices to be followed not so much as the reasons for the choice. Replicability, a fundamental character of scientific research, can be understood in architecture as the condition that allows us to understand the formal outcome in progressive choices. It is in this aspect that we can bring research in architecture (an inexact science) closer to traditional scientific research, that is, by equating the certain outcome of the exact answer of hard science to the non-uncertain but possible outcome of architecture.

As figures in training in teaching and research in architecture (such are doctoral students) it is correct to expect a certain methodological rigor of the project.

Having established the evaluation grid we can now shift our attention to the specific experience. In the curator’s proposal to address the theme of the Memorial Monument there was also the desire, in analogy to the Cuneo competition, to invest a Commission with the responsibility, – not only evaluative but factually formative in a pedagogical sense -, to choose the projects and direct the groups in the design depth of the second and final phase. This coincides perfectly with the formative role of the journal generally entrusted to the partisan review process.

Contextual designing: the themes offered (and those chosen)

Having always believed that abstract design does not exist, in other words, that designing means translating contextual valences, the design exercise takes its cue from five differentiated themes – *A Monument-Memorial for the Architecture of the “Three Worlds”*, *A Monument-Memorial for the Wars of Liberation*, *A Memorial in the “Monument”*, *A Monument-Memorial for the “Unfinished” Author*, *A Monument-Memorial in the Mediterranean*, which relate to five respective places/contexts: Havana, Cuba, Asmara, Eritrea, Climat de France, Algiers, Baggio, Milan, and the Island of Lampedusa, which relate more or less directly to five architectures: The Art Schools (ENA) by Garatti, Gottardi, Porro, the “Zero School” in Asmara, the residential unit at Climat de France by Pouillon, The Marchiondi-Spagliardi Institute by Viganò, and the Gateway to Europe by Mimmo Paladino. A combined relationship that allowed a diverse choice according to varying design approaches in terms of scale, themes, places and architectures (or architects).

The choice fell on three themes in particular, of which the construction of the Mediterranean Memorial Monument was the favorite: a project certainly not easy but one that guaranteed the possibility of expressing itself with unprecedented strength and freedom equal only to the tragedy it commemorates (the 368 migrants who died in the October 3, 2013 massacre). Neither the Marchiondi-Spagliardi Institute, a typically Milanese theme that nevertheless brought into play the fascinating aspect of the “unfinished” in a mid-twentieth-century work, nor the more international one of the Climat de France residential unit with its large square of “two hundred columns” (the largest of the urban basins, as he defines POUILLON 1968), succeeded in catalyzing the attention of the participants.

Completely ignored and not chosen were both Cuba and Asmara certainly the most distant and hostile in terms of comparison.

The commission

Paolo Icaro, Sculptor, former President of the Academy of St. Luke 2021-22 and Carmen Andriani, Full Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the University of Genoa, joined by the undersigned representing the magazine and Gentucca Canella creator of the call, were entrusted with the far from simple task of pre-selecting and judging in the two phases the different projects.

In the first phase the committee selected the ideas made explicit through the graphic “sketch” and abstract, while in the second phase the designers proceeded to the elaboration of the project and its representation in the form required by the call.

The final outcome

Beyond the judgments on the individual projects, for which I refer to Carmen Andriani’s precise essay, it is important to emphasize how many projects suffered from the misunderstanding of considering the presence of the sculptor as ancillary and not co-participating in the project by distinguishing between two different modes: the first that assumed the sculptor’s work as an element to be placed within the architectural project that was therefore conceived autonomously with respect to the solicitations (mostly indirect, that is, through his work) of the sculptor; the second that saw the sculptor reflecting autonomously but at least assuming the theme for the ad hoc conception of the sculpture.

In these cases, in fact, the committee wrote to the selected groups to “make the sculptor’s role in the development of the project more constructive,” which was not always interpreted in the final results in the correct meaning. Where, in my opinion, architect and sculptor measured themselves equally by stepping into the role of designer – albeit with a direction entrusted to the architect per se accustomed to the skillful and effective coordination of different technical or poetic components – the best results were manifested. Another aspect on which it is necessary to dwell is the relationship of the project to the context. In the three cases chosen by the groups, not even in the one where the relationship between the project and existing architecture is closest (the Marchiondi’s completion) did the architectural object appear to support the representation leading the commission to a general warning urging the groups to “make evident (also from the point of view of representation) the relationship with the chosen development context.” A certain general tendency to isolate the monument-memorial from the perceived context in the first phase later resulted in a more constructive and measured relationship.

There were, then, the specific directions given for each individual project that aimed to address weaknesses by directing the work of developing and deepening the project toward deficient aspects rather than uncovering latent ones.

In conclusion, a positive experimentation whose design outcomes corroborated by effective representations made it possible to baste a (partial but convincing) portrait of design in a field, the doctoral field, in which theoretical reflections are to be imagined as a function of the operativity of architecture. To reiterate, ultimately, the need to design by reflecting and reflect by designing.

Enrico Prandi (Mantua, 1969), architect, graduated with honors from the Faculty of Architecture in Milan with Guido Canella with whom he carried out teaching and research activities. He holds a PhD in Architectural and Urban Composition at the IUAV of Venice, obtaining the title in 2003. He is currently Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Department of Engineering and Architecture of the University of Parma. He is director of the Parma Architecture Festival and founder-director of the A-class international scientific magazine «FAMagazine. Research and projects on architecture and the city” (ISSN 2039-0491). He is the scientific director for the Parma unit of the project ArcheA. Architectural European Medium-Sized City Arrangement (published in volumes Routledge, Aión and LetteraVentidue). Among his publications: Luigi Vietti, scritti di architettura e urbanistica (con PV. Dell’Aira, AltraLinea, Florence 2022), Il progetto del Polo per l’Infanzia. Sperimentazioni architettoniche tra didattica e ricerca (Aión, Florence 2018); L’architettura della città lineare (FrancoAngeli, Milan 2016); European City Architecture, (with L. Amistadi, FAEdizioni, Parma 2012); Mantova. Saggio sull’architettura (FAEdizioni, Parma 2005).