dramatic changes in postwar society than about actual differences between the architects themselves.

V. OMUOMA
It is easy to point out everything that OMUOMA has overlooked or done wrong. What OMUOMA proposes, more than anything, is to keep the investigation of the tension between architecture, infrastructure and territory alive, and to keep imagining the culture that this could produce. The image of OMUOMA that flashed through our minds during Koolhaas’s lecture is that of an intergenerational pact, the description of an (architectural) history that does not have to erase everything in order to renew itself, resulting in a growing and increasingly complex body of work. What Schinkel did for Unger, OMUOMA could do for us by reminding us that we cannot step into a predetermined role, and that design should not be mistaken for a solution but can only be a means of understanding (and shaping) the reality around us.

INDIFFERENCE AND ABSORPTION OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM: NOTES ON LE CORBUSIER’S LA TOURETTE MONASTERY

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In recent times the issue of programme in architecture has been both celebrated as a "scientific" form-giving process and dismissed as a pretentious excuse for bizarre formal exercises. While in the 1960s programme was more important than architecture, in the last decade it seems that architecture has become more important than programme, to the point that it is a self-evident cliché to rely on architecture's neutrality and flexibility, its vague allusions, its lack of convincing content. Confronted with both the celebration and the dismissal of programme in architecture, it would be interesting to revisit a kind of architectural form that is indifferent to programme but flaunts this indifference in the face of a programme that is relevant and strong, one that could be strictly defined such as liturgical. Liturgia was the ritual service of the temple in ancient Greece and, as such, the essence of public duty itself. Christianity inherited this ritual in the form of the public officium (office) of the church. It is thus possible to say that all sacred architecture is strictly functional insofar as it facilitates the enactment of this public office. In sacred architecture, form must follow function -- form must adhere to the ritual just as the concave adheres to the convex. Such is the case of one of the most enigmatic, and to a certain degree absurd, works of modern architecture: Le Corbusier’s Monastery of La Tourette. Despite its explicit formalism, La Tourette does not dismiss the fact that the most important factor of the monastery is its content -- the manner of life of its monastic residents -- rather than its form. And yet it is precisely within this strictly defined programme that Le Corbusier offered one of the most intense reflections on the nature of architectural form by characterizing it as radically autonomous, almost indifferent to anything that would compromise its appearance. What does this deliberate paradox mean for architecture?

Tableaux

The design of the Monastery of La Tourette was commissioned from Le Corbusier by Father Marie-Alain Couturier, one of the editors of Art sacré, a reformist periodical dedicated to the revival of religious art in the modern world. The design process started in 1953 and the building was inaugurated in 1960. These were the years just before the Second Vatican Council, when the Catholic Church embarked on a radical renewal of its institutions. The commission was a bold act of self-challenge on the part of one of the most militant and severe mendicant orders, the Dominicans. Despite the cultural openness of Father Couturier, the Dominicans were the most unlikely order to accept the progressive simplicity of modernist architecture. Born to defend the prerogatives of the Catholic church against the Cathar heresy, the Dominicans were very familiar with the pitfalls of the extreme pauperism held so dear by other mendicant orders, such as the Franciscans.

This is why the aesthetic of La Tourette is not obviously progressive or heretical at the way other religious buildings designed by Le Corbusier are (in primis the Ronchamp Chapel). In spite of the many iconoclastic formal solutions that Le Corbusier put forward in the design of the Monastery, the project remained resolute in its adherence to the strict liturgy of monastic life: it consists of a series of shared spaces that reflect the rhythm of life of the monastic community clustered around a cloister ringed by individual cells. In the organization of the plan Le Corbusier remained fairly faithful to a diagram sketched by Father Couturier that he published in his Oeuvre complete as the introduction to his proposal. Indeed, what is impressive about La Tourette is its almost pedantic functionalism. Each function is signalled by a different treatment of the façade; in spite of the compactness of its overall form, the building seems like an awkward assemblage of different “boxes”, each containing a clearly defined function.

Le Corbusier raised the Monastery (with the exception of the church) on pilotis, a solution that further emphasized the awkwardness of the building’s sitting on a west-facing slope. In the initial steps of the design, the monastery was to be accessed via a long ramp linking the ground to the top of the building; although this solution was later abandoned, the idea of maintaining the roof level as the only stable datum remained the main formal motif. The continuous line of the top profile became the steady background against which a composition of forms was shamelessly staged both inside the cloister and toward the surrounding landscape. If we were to display all of the elevations of the Monastery as one continuous façade, we would obtain a series of tableaux, moving from the self-sufficient concrete frame placed in front of an otherwise unceremonious entrance, to the pyramid of the oratory, to the fragile mullions of the chapterhouse and library (which -- regardless of their famously sophisticated proportions -- only block what would otherwise be a stunning landscape view). This tableau-like composition reaches its climax on the north side of the church. As is well known, this is the side of the Monastery that presents itself first to visitors, “welcoming” them with an imposing blank wall against which Le Corbusier placed the most gratuitously formalistic composition he ever conceived: the chapel's curvy wall topped by its
light cannons. This tableau has been the focus of several readings of La Tourette, most notably the seminal article by Colin Rowe. Rowe suggested that the blank wall, in all its opaqueness, was not an object in and of itself, but rather the projection of something more yet to come. Rowe saw the blank wall as "a great dam holding back a reservoir of spiritual energy". Even if he acknowledged the power that the Monastery exercises in preventing a ceremonial approach to it, his analysis still insisted on a kinetic view of the blank wall, as if it were just the invitation to something else. This reading of La Tourette has remained the standard ever since, and indeed most photographers choose to represent the Monastery through views that simultaneously capture two sides of the building. All the critics who have celebrated La Tourette insist upon the importance of impatiently "walking around" the Monastery; however, the formal compositions described thus far are not merely targeted at a peripatetic experience of the building. Due to its lack of grace and balance, Le Corbusier's formal tour de force produces the strange feeling of witnessing a never-ending series of non-seuqitur architectural episodes. Each of these episodes is a tableau whose formal workings are so tight and concentrated within themselves that they seem to deny the fact that they have to be seen or inhabited. And yet such a provocative use of architecture is applied not to a gratuitous architectural exercise (like a pavilion or a folly), but to the quintessentially programmatic building: the monastery. The experience of La Tourette ultimately lies in the unresolvable contradictions of its character, which is extremely functional yet extremely formal. With the exception of the church, the monastery's interior architecture is utterly unspectacular to the point that the building has, as has been noted, the atmosphere of a "grim school or administrative building". 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. By being exposed to the fact that a structure must be inhabited in order to be architecture, formal expression reveals that all its potential is merely to be itself, indifferent toward both its context and the life that takes place within it.

Absorption

The constructive logic of La Tourette synthesized two of the most important housing prototypes proposed by Le Corbusier: the Maison Dom-in (1914) and the Maison Citrohan (1922). In these models Le Corbusier developed a quintessentially modern living space in which architecture is reduced to a minimum and emptiness is maximized. This condition was intended to allow architecture to be never completed in itself, but rather open and adaptable to any unforeseen use. In these two prototypes Le Corbusier made evident the most fundamental fact of modern architecture: its total adherence to life understood as bare life, i.e., the most generic characteristics of man. These characteristics are the human species's constant uprootedness, its lack of specialized instincts, its permanent feeling of not being at home. Therefore, what the generic space of the Dom-in and Citrohan houses manifests with utmost clarity is the instability of the human condition. Paraphrasing Michael Fried's famous attack on Minimal Art, it is possible to say that the space of these Le Corbusier models is theatrical. At this point it is crucial for our argument that we briefly review what was at stake in Fried's criticism of theatricality in Minimal Art. He argued that the theatrical artworks were only activated or completed by the movement of the beholder. For example, the sculptures of Donald Judd and Robert Morris are never completed in themselves because their appearance involves not only the actual space of the gallery, but also the movement of the spectator around and through them. For Fried, such an experience would blur the distinction between what is art and what does not necessarily have to become art. Art is the opposite of the everyday: to behold an artwork is to experience a moment of suspension of our being-in-the-world, a moment in which something does not unfold in time like most events we experience in our everyday life, but rather appears to us in its inexorable presentness. Fried described this experience in an almost religious way by declaring at the end of his essay that "presentness is grace".

In order to oppose theatrical art and reinforce the beholding of art as something removed from the literal space of experience, Fried's subsequent studies of painting proposed the concept of absorption. Absorption refers to a condition in which an artwork is completed in itself without the need to engage the beholder. For Fried, this was evident in Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's Young Student Drawing, in which the French painter portrays a man seen from behind, completely absorbed by his own activity of drawing. Another example of absorption are the paintings by Morris Louis in which the relationship between the rivulets or stripes of colour and the rectangular blank canvas is so strong and complete that it presupposes an arrested or "transfixed" beholder before them. Absorption calls for artworks that
are resolutely themselves and do not concede anything to the beholder. In contrast, in a condition of theatricality, artworks are experienced through a situation of radical indeterminacy with respect to the subjective response of the viewer. This means that the intentions of the artists are no longer recognizable because they become confused with the subject's experience of the artwork itself. Fried's attack on the "participatory" nature of Minimal Art (which today is a generalized condition of much contemporary art and California Press, 1980).

20 Ibid., 13–14.


22 Potie, Le Corbusier, 80.

23 A discussion of asceticism as a response to an induced sense of guilt can be found in Elettra Stimmili, il debito del vivente: Ascesi e capitalismo (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011).

As said earlier, La Tourette is the final outcome of the constructive logic explored in the Maison Dom-in and Maison Citrohan, two paradigms of literal architecture that are perennially unfinished and radically reduced to their load-bearing structures. The utilitarian character of the building technique used at La Tourette is made explicit in the beton brut of the north side of the church, which Le Corbusier realized using the same method of dams built in the Alps. However, the tableau-like formal compositions displayed at La Tourette contradict the literalness of the project's construction method. While passing through a rationally planned sequence of spaces, the visitor is constantly confronted with the architectural tableaux described earlier, which are, as we have seen, not only utterly indifferent to the use and function of these spaces, but also radically finite compositions. So what sort of beholder do these tableaux imply? These formal tableaux presuppose an arrested or "transfixed" beholder, someone in a condition that embodies precisely the mental and physical experience of asceticism, the form of life fostered by monastic architecture.

Asceticism

Asceticism is often confused with self-punishment as a way to counter a sense of guilt imposed upon the subject by an external force. But if we consider the way of life of early monasticism and that of the later mendicant orders, asceticism has a radically different meaning. Here asceticism is the constant exercise focused on the body and mind that is designed to test their limits and reveal their potential. The main function of monastic architecture was to create a situation of utmost self-awareness. This was achieved through the construction of specific spatial moments that engendered what Fried would call a condition of absorption, or of suspension from the time of the everyday. Spaces that display a resolute, finite, uncompromising formal resolution become the best backgrounds for the exercise of self-awareness. Here asceticism becomes an exercise that is fuelled not by guilt or self-loathing but, on the contrary, by the desire to become the absolute master of one's own life: to achieve happiness and perfection. After all, ironically the ultimate ascetic space is the column of the stylike, an extreme architecture that lost its functional content and became a sculptural, absolute work governed by its own internal aesthetic logic.

At La Tourette, the many formal expedients that look accidental or irrational - from the use of colour to the blocked windows that conclude each corridor with a blank panel rather than a vista - estrange the building from its bare use; life is lived against the building, not merely in it. In this respect, La Tourette becomes an ascetic space, for it makes the user more aware of his own body and his relationship to his surroundings through the open display of its many inconsistencies and self-referential formal gestures.

As we have seen in plan, the disposition of the spaces of La Tourette responds to the canonical chronotope of the monastery - a layout that is at once a schedule and the embodiment of a rule. However, in section and façade the actual architecture contradicts at each step the rationality of the plan: a building that hangs from its roof, a cloister that cannot actually be accessed, a hidden entrance, a wealth of lighting devices that seem to do anything possible to force light in in the most unnatural ways. This paradoxical condition of a simultaneous adherence to programme and a development of an intrinsic logic that cannot be argued in functional terms is possible thanks to the specific nature of religious architecture, an architecture that, however informed by practical concerns it may be, can never be measured in terms of performance. In fact, even the term function here loses its meaning and should rather be replaced by liturgy. Function is a set of actions in which the sequence is not predetermined; functionalist design is ultimately geared toward offering space that is "easy to use" - and it does this through a careful planning of the user's responses. Liturgy is a precise set of gestures that forms a pattern which, in its extremely repetitive nature, can only be undertaken voluntarily and always gains a collective dimension. As the direct materialization of ritual, liturgical spaces tend to force their users into specific
movements; they neither seek interaction nor require use, since their purpose is already present in their form regardless of the presence of users. They do not have a time horizon, for the time of the ritual is necessarily cyclical and eternal, whereas functional space is always designed for an incessantly immediate future as a space of potential, growth and “becoming”. In their fundamental indifference to the praxis of their users, liturgical spaces allow visitors a paradoxical form of freedom: they turn their back to the subjects because they already are the ritual.

While it would be simplistic to see a burgeoning form of resistance against the managerial rationale of the Dom-in-o model in the possibility of asceticism put forward by La Tourette, it might not be out of place to consider that modern architecture is not necessarily condemned to being “theatrical”, and that architectural form has not exhausted its potential to generate instances of absorption, or chances for reflection that can be born only in a momentary detachment from the practical nature of things.

Neither smoothly flexible nor obtusely programme-driven, the architecture of La Tourette posits the relationship between form and content, and between building and life, as a dialectic that pretends to be not resolved but merely experienced. It is precisely in this gap in the articulation of the distance between liturgy and representation – in the crack between what architecture can define and what cannot be programmed – that La Tourette helps us to understand the potential of architectural form in general. Here, architectural form is a challenge to both the cliché of context and function as disingenuous crutches for form and the supposed neutrality of form. In La Tourette, form is revealed in all its awkward, inexplicable beauty and in its relentless indifference and, thus, presentness.

To ask whether architecture is indifferent is to ask whether, and how, architecture is political, for indifference is not simply an ideological attitude or idiosyncratic point of departure: it is the opponent of difference, that comparative category which enables things to have a stable, normative identity. Like the “duck-rabbit” figure, indifference means refraining from a priori positions and allowing different objects to collide in an open-ended process of semantic redefinition. “Indifference”, according to Gilles Deleuze, “has two aspects: the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved – but also the white nothingness, the once more calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations like scattered members: a head without a neck, an arm without a shoulder, eyes without brows.”2 Analogous to the condition of the simulacrum, indifference for Deleuze is a potential interruption or overturning of the law.2 For architecture, this would mean that a building is indifferent when it is integrated into the social and political order of things, only to dislodge and redefine/negotiate the “social” and “political” from within. An indifferent building is a political building: it is where architecture infiltrates, occupies and then destabilizes the existing world order.

The work of Belgian artist-architect Luc Deleu and his T.O.P office is highly attuned to such indifference, as it has been allegorizing the disciplinary, social and political sway of architecture since 1968. At a time when simulation and appropriation redefined the landscapes of art and architecture alike (developments for which, in the field of art at least, Deleuze was celebrated as a primary theorietician), Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office engaged with images and image-making in ways...

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2 “In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality.” By interconnecting repetition and indifference, or “pure difference”, this law-disruptive character can be claimed for both concepts; ibid., 3.