ARCHITECTURE AND UTOPIA. DESIGN AND CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT

PREFACE

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This volume is the result of a reworking and sizeable enlargement of my essay, *Per una critica dell’ideologia architettonica*, published in the periodical *Contropiano* (1969, no. 1).

Immediately after the publication of that essay many more or less violent stands were taken in regard to its theses. To these I have always avoided responding directly, not so much out of a lack of respect for my critics, as for reasons which must now of necessity be clarified once and for all. The essay published in *Contropiano*—in a deliberately summary and sketchy form—carried to their extreme consequences those hypotheses already expressed in my *Teorie e storia dell’architettura*. Rereading the history of modern architecture in the light of methods offered by an ideological criticism, understood in the strictest Marxist acceptance of the term, could, six years ago, furnish only a frame of reference for further examination, and only a partial and circumstantial analysis of individual problems. The journal that published this essay (and others by myself and by colleagues working along the same lines) was so clearly defined in its political history and particular line of thought and interests, that one would have supposed that many equivocal interpretations might *a priori* have been avoided.

This was not the case. By isolating the architectural problems treated from the theoretical context of the journal, the way was found to consider my essay an apocalyptic prophecy, the expression of renunciation, the ultimate pronouncement of the death of architecture.

And yet, what in 1968—1969 was only a working hypothesis became—especially with the research carried on at the Historical Institute of the Institute of Architecture of the University of Venice—something specific, enriched, and defined in many of its basic principles. The relationship between the historical avant-garde movements and the metropolis, the relationships between intellectual work and capitalist development, researches on German sociology of the early twentieth century, on ideology and the planning practices of the Soviet Union, on the social-democratic administration of the city, on architecture and American cities, and on the building cycle, have been the object of a collaborative program of study, and one very far indeed from pretending to have arrived at any firm and dogmatic conclusions.

Publishing now in 1975 the English edition of the book based on my essay of 1969, I more than anyone realize the ground since covered, the changes of judgment made necessary by more accurate investigation, and the weaknesses of those first hypotheses. It seems to me, however, that on the whole those hypotheses have stood up, and that the argument can now be developed on the basis of analysis and documentation, and not merely on the basis of principles.

In order to discuss these principles, however, it is necessary to enter into the field of political theory as this has been developed by the most advanced studies of Marxist thought from 1960 to the present. Ideological criticism cannot be separated from this context. It is an integral part of it, and all the more so when it is conscious of its own limits and its own sphere of action.
It should be stated immediately that the critical analysis of the basic principles of contemporary architectural ideology does not pretend to have any “revolutionary” aim. What is of interest here is the precise identification of those tasks which capitalist development has taken away from architecture. That is to say, what it has taken away in general from ideological prefiguration. With this, one is led almost automatically to the discovery of what may well be the “drama” of architecture today: that is, to see architecture obliged to return to pure architecture, to form without Utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness. To the deceptive attempts to give architecture an ideological dress, I shall always prefer the sincerity of those who have the courage to speak of that silent and outdated “purity” even if this, too, still harbors an ideological inspiration, pathetic in its anachronism.

Paradoxically, the new tasks given to architecture are something besides or beyond architecture. In recognizing this situation, which I mean to corroborate historically, I am expressing no regret, but neither am I making an apocalyptic prophecy. No regret, because when the role of a discipline ceases to exist, to try to stop the course of things is only regressive Utopia, and of the worst kind. No prophecy, because the process is actually taking place daily before our eyes. And for those wishing striking proof, it is enough to observe the percentage of architectural graduates really exercising that profession.

Also, there is the fact that this decline within the profession proper has not yet resulted in a corresponding institutionally defined role for the technicians charged with building activity. For this reason one is left to navigate in empty space, in which anything can happen but nothing is decisive.

This does not mean that a lucid awareness of the present situation is not necessary. But the objective of finding this institutionally defined role cannot be achieved by presenting illusory hopes. And note that it is an objective which is still ambiguous in itself. Doing away with outdated myths, one certainly does not see on the architectural horizon any ray of an alternative, of a technology of the working class.

Ideology is useless to capitalist development, just as it is damaging from the working-class point of view. After the studies of Fortini in Verifica dei poteri, and those of Tronti, Asor Rosa, and Cacciari, I feel it superfluous to turn again to German Ideology to demonstrate this fact. Of course, once the work of ideological criticism has been completed, there remains the problem of deciding what instruments of knowledge might be immediately useful to the political struggle. It is precisely here that my discourse must end, but certainly not by choice.

From the criticism of ideology it is necessary to pass on to the analysis of the techniques of programming and of the ways in which these techniques actually affect the vital relationships of production. That is to say, we must proceed to analyses that, in the field of building activities, are only today being attempted with the necessary precision and coherence. For those anxiously seeking an operative criticism, I can only respond with an invitation to transform themselves into analysts of some precisely defined economic sector, each with an eye fixed on bringing together capitalist development and the processes of reorganization and consolidation of the working class.

In respect to such tasks this book is only, a prologue. And given the summary way in which the problems are deliberately treated, it is but a historical outline that has been worked over and verified in only some of its parts. It will be necessary to go beyond this, but in the meantime I feel it not wholly useless to present this framework of a hypothesis, which if nothing else offers its own formal completeness. And it would already be a result, if such
a hypothesis were to contribute to rendering agreements and disagreements more conscious and radical.