

Morality and architecture: evaluation of contemporary architectural practice within the scope of the ontological hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer

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Within Western tradition, there is a close relation between morality and architecture, which could be traced further back from Classical antiquity in the Homeric and the Mycenaean age. The moral justification of Western architecture was grounded mainly on religious, political and philosophical terms during Greek and Roman antiquity, medieval times and Renaissance, which shifted into social, political, rational and technological within the limits of Modern architecture.

In philosophical terms, we could argue that the Platonic conception of the particulars (aestheta) as expressions of cosmic unity among reason, morality and beauty, underlie the form of the works of architecture up to the modern times. The interruption of this unity accomplished by Kant during the Enlightenment endows aesthetics with an autonomous operation, disinterested to both, reason and morality alike. We should keep in mind that – in contrast to the Greek all embracing concept of reason as logos, which implied a unity between man and nature, the Kantian separation is well preserved inside human consciousness. As a consequence, architecture enters the threshold of the twentieth century suffering an inner contradiction between its aesthetic self claiming total independence and a moral, engaged into a social mission, self.

In the last three decades, Western avant-garde architecture shows two principal attitudes towards morality. The one is connected with the interpretation of values of the past and can be philosophically founded mainly upon Plato, Hegel,

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Heidegger and Gadamer, while the other is referred to a critical attitude towards knowledge which departs from the Nietzschean critique of values and is related principally to philosophers as Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze. The aesthetic implications on architectural form of Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of morality will be examined here, in connection with the role of architecture within the contemporary cultural-political situation. In order to elucidate our argument further, we will make a short reference to contrasting attitudes to morality deriving mainly from Nietzsche, as mentioned above.

We will start our discussion with the polemic of the art historian David Watkin against any attempt to ground architecture on morality, expressed in his book *Morality and Architecture*, first published by Oxford University Press in 1977. Watkin maintains that the claim of architecture to morality undermines individual imagination as well as the aesthetic value of the work carried on by artistic tradition. Watkin's approach is not only very close to Kant's concept of aesthetic autonomy but, more than that, it rigorously defends the supremacy of the aesthetic factor in architecture. On this ground, Watkin proceeds to a critique of the architectural theory of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. He classifies architectural theory in three categories:

The first category focusses on the attempts to explain the principles of architectural form in terms of religion, sociology and politics. According to Watkin (1977, pp. 3-4), it is the nineteenth art theorist Pugin he who initiates architecture's claim to morality in the modern era. In his *Contrasts* (1836), Pugin claims that the same principles that underlie religious truths should underlie the form of a building. Engaged in the legacy of Pugin's claim to truth, Modern architecture has to defeat religious doctrines with some other kind of truth, Watkin argues.¹ Thus, in order to be morally justified, Modern architecture has to become a rational instrument of social policy. Furthermore, it has to express the "true" nature of the materials.

The second category of architectural theory related to the moral foundation of contemporary architecture, against which Watkin is skeptical, is that based on the concept of the *Zeitgeist*, which implies the Hegelian conviction that all human creation is subject to "the inevitable process of an all-pervasive spirit" (Watkin 1977, p. 6). It is closely linked to the art-historian tradition represented by

¹ Within the limits of Modern Avant-guard architecture, the religious foundation of architecture retreats in favour of social, moral and philosophical principles. In Le Corbusier's words: "A man who practices a religion and does not believe in it is a poor wretch; (...) We are to be pitied for living in unworthy houses, since they ruin our health and our *morale*" (Le Corbusier 1987, p. 14). As Giedion states "contemporary architecture takes its start in a *moral* problem ... (and where it) has been allowed to provide a new setting for contemporary life, this new life has acted in turn upon the life from which it springs. The new atmosphere has led to change and development in the conceptions of the people who live in it" (Giedion 1971, p. 705; discussed in: Watkin 1977, p.4).

Burckhardt, Wolfflin, Giedion, Riegl and others. Watkin accuses the historian of modern architecture Pevsner that with his persistence on a historicist and *Zeitgeist* inspired belief, he forces modern artist to deny a tradition of his own in favour of externally dictated new political and economic conditions. In so doing, Watkin condemns any attempt to apply to present political organizations mentally constructed holistic patterns of interpretation of the past. In the same spirit, Watkin rejects Alois Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*, as far as it implies that art carries an inherent teleology against which the will of the individual is powerless (Watkin 1977, p. 8).

The third category of architectural theory dealing with the principles underlying Modern architecture, which Watkin despises, is the rational-technological one. It originates in the 18th century French theorists and is related to Classical, Gothic or "modern" architecture. As Viollet-le-Duc (1889, vol. I, p. 448) puts it, giving a mechanistic interpretation of the Gothic, "we must be true in respect of the programme, and true in respect of the constructive processes." (Watkin 1977, p. 8). The programme, concerning the organization of human functional needs in space, as well as the structural needs of the work, constitute - in moral terms - the source of form of modern architecture. Truth and morality are defined on the basis of universality implied by a new collectivist society. We can gather, Watkin assumes, that individual taste and imagination are immoral and false as far as architectural form is concerned (Watkin 1977, p. 14; Pevsner 2005, pp. 110-11).

Hans-Georg Gadamer is related to the second of Watkin's categories of architectural theory, as far as his philosophy is built upon the tradition of the *Zeitgeist* and the historical articulation of the self. Gadamer transcends the Hegelian philosophy of history, and, on the basis of Heidegger's ontology, he replaces the Cartesian subjectivity of consciousness by the operation of understanding: being which understands himself within a temporality. The revelation of truth carried on by tradition is the principal task of Gadamer's hermeneutics, developed thoroughly in his seminal work *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 2004).

Rejecting the application of the scientific method, which - deriving from the field of the natural sciences - has been extended to all fields of knowledge, Gadamer looks for truth in the experience of art, on the basis of a phenomenological understanding of the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophy. He claims an affinity between his idea of a universal hermeneutics and Plato's theory of beauty. He considers his philosophy as part of the continuity of the Platonic tradition, from antiquity to the present times. If Platonic tradition is fragmentary, Gadamer (2004, pp. 480-481) insists, it is because it resembles an undercurrent, which permeates the philosophy of Aristotle and the Scholastics, and sometimes comes to the surface as in Neoplatonic and Christian mysticism and in theological and philosophical spiritualism.

Launching an attack on Kant's disinterested pleasure, separated from truth and morality, Gadamer attempts to restore the ontological status of the thing. Only

from the moral standpoint can be interest in the real, factual existence of the beautiful. In Plato, morality (agathon) is interwoven with beauty (kalon). In fact, “the beautiful reveals itself in the search for the good” (Gadamer 2004, p. 475). In Philebus, aletheia “is part of the nature of the beautiful” while “beauty is not simply symmetry but appearance itself” (Gadamer 2004, p. 477). Furthermore, the essential element of the beautiful is aletheia (non-forgetfulness, truth). The Platonic concept of participation (methexis) indicates that beauty mediates between ideas and appearances. In Phaedrus, Plato uses the example of the beautiful to manifest the “parousia” of the eidos. According to its ontological function, beauty has a special advantage compared to morality: it makes itself immediately evident. Following Plato, Gadamer (2004, p. 476) asserts that beauty is the way in which goodness acquires appearance.

The Pythagorean and Platonic concept of measure is the basis of the close relation between the beautiful and the teleological order of things. Measure, appropriateness and right proportions are the constituent parts of the beautiful for Plato, while Aristotle states that the eide of the beautiful are order (taxis), right proportion (symmetria) and definition (to orismenon). The cosmos is the supreme example of the mathematical orders of the beautiful. This kind of definition of the beautiful is a universal ontological one and implies unity between art and nature, with the priority of nature, claims Gadamer (2004, p. 474).² Man will ultimately understand all beauty in terms of the work of his own mind.

The meaning of a return to Plato, Gadamer explains, is not the reviving of an “aesthetics of perfection” of the 18th century. Arguing that Kant “convincingly proved the untenability of aesthetic rationalism” Gadamer insists that “it is incorrect to base the metaphysics of the beautiful solely on the ontology of measure and the teleological order of being” (Gadamer 2004, p. 475). The principal ontological function of the Platonic beautiful is, for Gadamer, its mediation between idea and appearance towards the achievement of unity (methexis). Although morality alone has not the power of appearance, it stimulates the operation of the beautiful.

As far as the relation between morality and practical needs is concerned, Gadamer (2004, pp. 472-3) states that the Greek word for beauty, kalon, is in antithesis to the chresimon (useful). Kalon is part of paideia and not of the necessities of life. It does not have an instrumental value. It is desirable for its own sake and not for the sake of something else. Following Gadamer, we could insist that morality and consequently beauty are alien to the practical needs architecture

² Gadamer (2004, p. 474) relates the ontological value of measure and harmony in Plato and Aristotle to the concept of form as Gestalt in modern times, and he criticizes the use of Gestalt by modern science (especially in living nature, biology and psychology), as a subtle way to dominate being. He also argues that science accepts the beauty of nature, the beauty of art and the disinterested pleasure only to the extent that beauty serves science’s purpose to dominate nature.

has to fulfill. This is totally contradicting with the foundational principles of Modern architecture, where morality is connected to practical needs.

Through the hermeneutic experience, being presents itself as language (Gadamer 2004, pp. 587ff). Dialectics as an open-ended activity constitute the core of language. This activity is meaningless without the involvement of praxis. Gadamer proposes his hermeneutic circle: from understanding to interpretation and then to application. Phenomenological understanding of tradition becomes the basis for its interpretation, from the point of view of the interpreter's particular social-cultural situation. In this way, the prejudices of the interpreter are preconditions for the truth of interpretation (Gadamer 2004, p. 267). Application comes out as the result of interpretation, just in order to keep the interpretative procedure in action. The work of art and architecture can come to light through this procedure and enjoy existence as form of appearance of knowledge within the limits of a unified, all-embracing logos. Despite the fact that through the interpretative procedure the work is in a constant flux, it constitutes always a coherent, harmonic whole. It is the potentially endless series of different each other works that can come out through the same procedure, that express the event character of the work as an embodiment of morality within the realm of Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics.

Renaissance architecture seems to be an excellent example of understanding and interpretation of past values according to Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy. In the *Quattro libri dell' architettura*, first published in 1570, Palladio maintains that the practice of architecture as a manifestation of *virtue* is a moral obligation for the architect (Palladio 1965). He attempts to recreate classical Roman architecture interpreted through the teachings of the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophy. In his work, he points to virtue in several ways: by imitating the colonnades of the classical agora as the quintessence of the political space in Greece and Rome, by formulating the entrance of his villas in such a way as to resemble the entrance part of classical temples, by using rules of proportion and symmetry in order to achieve unity of form in itself and with cosmos (Wittkower 1973, pp. 577-145).

Nevertheless, seeking to clarify the concept of historical consciousness, Gadamer refers to Palladio in a negative way: "The aim of historical consciousness is not to use the classical model in the direct way, like Palladio or Corneille, but to know it as a historical phenomenon that can be understood solely in terms of its own time" (Gadamer 2004, p. 290). Gadamer considers that Palladio's architecture is merely a historical reconstruction of the past. Within hermeneutic theory, it is fundamental that understanding retains the consciousness that we belong to the historical world of the work, and that the work belongs to our world, too. In Palladio, architectural form does not come forth through the understanding of a particular historical period as a whole - as Gadamer suggests - but through a procedure which implies fragmentation and selection, as far as he mainly merged Roman forms on the one hand and classical Greek philosophy on the other.

In fact, Palladio exerted an immense influence not only on the Classical but on the modern and our contemporary architecture as well. The historian of architecture Colin Rowe, in his book "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and other Essays", where he investigates the classical origins of the Modern, asserts that Le Corbusier's villas echo Palladio's appeal to Roman virtue by means of mathematical harmony (Rowe 1988, pp. 8ff).

Gadamer is opposite to a mathematical expression of virtue as far as the application of the ideas on the particulars is concerned. Thus he has one more reason to be skeptical against Palladio's architecture. His position departs from the Aristotelian ethics as a discipline independent of metaphysics. As he explains (Gadamer 2004, p. 312), the hermeneutic problem is a problem of applying something universal to something particular, time and again, in different ways. Proceeding on the basis of the Socratic teachings, Aristotle maintains that knowledge is an essential component of moral being.³ Knowledge is meaningless for Aristotle without application. This is what gives the problem of method a moral relevance. In opposition to Plato's conception of the good, it is not only impossible but also inappropriate for ethics to achieve the extreme exactitude of mathematics (Gadamer 2004, p. 311). Therefore, we could argue that, as a consequence, a work of architecture may express truth even without mathematical harmony.

The concept of application within Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy codetermines understanding from the beginning. Far from concerning the imposition of something pre-given universal upon a particular situation, application rather deals with the understanding of the universal within the particular hermeneutical situation of the interpreter (Gadamer 2004, p. 321). As far as architecture is concerned, we could discern between the use of classical architecture in the service of Hitler's political ideals for instance, and the interpretation of classical tradition at the urban villas on Rauchstrasse at Berlin, by Rob & Leon Krier, Aldo Rossi, Mario Botta, Hans Hollein, Giorgio Grassi.

"Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition" claims Gadamer (2004, p. 291). In this spirit, contemporary architects like Leo & Rob Krier (1979), Aldo Rossi (1982), Carlo Scarpa, Dimitris Pikionis, Demetri Porphyrios (1982) may express a comprehensive understanding of tradition according to Gadamer's meaning of the term. They all reject forms related to science and technology and appeal to tradition as a continuum of

³ As Gadamer discusses, Aristotle makes a distinction between moral knowledge (phronesis) and theoretical knowledge (episteme). Episteme is provable knowledge represented by mathematics. Human sciences are related to moral knowledge. Their object is man and what he knows of himself. Man knows of himself as an active being. For the Greeks, art (techne) is an exemplary form of action governed by knowledge. As such, it is related to moral and consequently to practical knowledge (Gadamer 2004, pp. 312-313).

human existence with the world within its temporality. We can argue, in Gadamer's terms, that their architecture, more than an expression of the idea of the good as an empty generality through the reproduction of classical forms and harmonic mathematical relations, is the outcome of a moral action departing from and returning to the phenomenological understanding of the past.

Gadamer admits that his endeavor to unify man and the world within history and outside metaphysics as a continuous, never ending process, despite its Hegelian resonances, is in fact greatly indebted to the Nietzschean concept of interpretation as opposite to metaphysical truth. Nevertheless, if we assert along with Nietzsche's critique of morality that history is nothing but a parade of religious, political and other forces disguised behind forms, and that knowledge – not only rational but logico-philosophical as well - since Plato and Socrates, has as its aim to conquer and destroy things, the unity and the coherency of the whole construction of Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics is put under question (Nietzsche 1998).

The concept of application in Gadamer's hermeneutic circle does not intend to give form per se any particular significance. Form is not meant to be understood by itself. Thus Classical form for Gadamer is not carrier of goodness and truth by its own merit. In this sense, Hitler could not regenerate Roman ideals by building a Pantheon at Berlin, as he intended to. The interpreter has to deal with the understanding of the particular socio-cultural situation of the work, while he is conditioned by his own historicity. Thus, instead of a single horizon of the present, we have fusion of historical horizons in the light of the present. Pre-understanding as well as prejudice are involved in the interplay with tradition (Gadamer 2004, pp. 267-73). Pre-understanding is what Heidegger called the fore-structure of knowledge. It implies that we always interpret on the basis of some conceptualizations which form the ground of our understanding. Prejudices are conditions of understanding (Gadamer 2004, pp. 277-98). There can be no understanding and no knowledge without them. Gadamer asserts that only through our openness to the truth of tradition we can constantly test our prejudices. The generation of form serves as a medium towards the achievement of moral knowledge, through a never ending, open procedure of understanding, between the interpreter and tradition. This is probably the sense of Gadamer's reference to Palladio: continuity does not mean resemblance.

We discussed above contemporary western architecture's attitude towards morality in relation to Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics. Next, we are going to give a brief account of the opposite attitude, which derives from the Nietzschean critique to morality and has been expressed by philosophers as Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze, in relation to architecture.

Rejecting any historicist attempt to achieve unity and consistency between the present and the past, Lyotard asserts that the *Zeitgeist* mourns, as far as it cannot open up new perspectives for man. The only it can do instead, is to express itself through reactionary attitudes or utopias. The disappearance of the idea of

progress interwoven with rationality and freedom can only be expressed by postmodern architecture as a bricolage, Lyotard argues: quotations of elements from previous periods and styles, conceived as in a dream. He refers to architects as Paolo Portoghesi or Vittorio Gregotti (Lyotard 1986, pp. 6-7). His conception reminds us of Walter Benjamin's description of Klee's "Angelus Novus": The angel of history is contemplating, staring at the ruins of the past, while a storm moves him backwards, to the future (Benjamin 1969, p. 257).

Within the limits of Derrida's philosophy of Deconstruction, the relation of contemporary architecture with tradition is founded on the Nietzschean notion of destruction of identity, which indicates the rejection of the archetype, in favor of disguise or interpretation (Derrida, 2004; Derrida & Peter Eisenman). The work ceases to be a coherent and homogenous whole. Stability, measure and harmony dissolve. The limits diffuse. The gathering of fragments which do not compose a whole and react to any imposition of order, constitute the architectural metaphor of Deconstruction. Allegory substitutes for mimesis and the archetype is replaced by montage (Owens 1984, pp. 203-35). The works of architects as Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, the team Coop Himmelblau, are closely connected to the philosophy of Deconstruction (Johnson & Wigley 1988; Papadakis 1989; Tschumi 1996).

Under the influence of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, contemporary avant-garde architecture becomes an allegory for the infinitesimal structure of our consciousness (Deleuze 2007; Cache 1995; Lynn 2004). Synthesis and unity concern the fusion of simple heterogeneous components into continuities, while they retain their status. Liable to the action of powers, to interpenetration and fusion, contemporary architecture ends up as fluid architecture, architectural geography, interactive architecture, architecture of surface consciousness, neoplasmatic architecture (Wiley 2002, 2004, 2008).

We started our discussion with a critique of the architectural theory of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century by David Watkin. Watkin maintains that modern architecture, despite its claim to aesthetic autonomy, is well anchored on morality, in social, political, rational and technological terms, as well as in terms of the *Zeitgeist*. In this way, morality undermines individual imagination as well as the aesthetic value of the work carried on by artistic tradition.

Launching an attack on Kant's disinterested pleasure, Gadamer attempts to restore the ontological status of the thing through a unity among aesthetics, morality and reason, on the basis of the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophy. He proposes his interpretative circle which operates inside dialectics as an open-ended activity. An endless series of works can come out through a continuous procedure of understanding-interpretation-application. Nevertheless, the unity and coherency which architecture enjoys within Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics is severely disrupted in works related to an opposite attitude to

morality, departing from Nietzsche. The need for a continuous dialogue between the two, opposing attitudes discussed above, in relation to architecture, the one represented by Gadamer and the other by philosophers as Lyotard, Derrida or Deleuze, is fundamental. Furthermore, contemporary Avant-guard architecture is greatly indebted to philosophy for providing it with means of communication and interplay with other fields of human expression and action within our society.

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