MEANING IN ARCHITECTURE
A FUTURE LEGACY

Edited by Carlo Deregibus and Aurosa Alison

CALL FOR PAPERS

We are used to looking at **the forms of architecture as bearers of meaning**. The connection between form and meaning was so obvious, so inherent in social construction and reality, that it mainly remained implicit, a premise of any discourse and treatise. It held true in classical architecture, as in medieval, Egyptian, Baroque, modern architecture, and even in what is properly called postmodern architecture. Only in relatively recent times, when postmodernism shook, more than the link itself, the unambiguousness of that link, did meaning become a problem for architecture. On the one hand, because the mission of Modernity, so absolute as to polarize any debate, eventually turned out to be aleatory. On the other, because this is when the first hints of a change that will become overwhelming in the new millennium, made up of globalization and multiplication of thought, occurred. Then, the new paradigm was that **the form is part of a system of communication of meanings** rather than the bearer of an unambiguous message.

In this context, **Charles Jencks and Georges Baird edited the book** *Meaning in Architecture* **(1969),** translated in Italy as *Il significato in architettura* five years later (that is, fifty years ago). The book collected approximately fifteen quite contrasting edited and annotated texts, investigating meaning from various points of view: according to semiotic or phenomenological approaches, with theoretical or operational accents, with criticisms or proposals, the authors traced a history of *possible* meaning. So much so that the very contrast, at times violent and explicitly stirred up by the editors, becomes the most distinctive feature of the volume: a clash made possible by the (indeed vain) belief that it was still possible to define *the* relationship between meaning and forms.

What remains, fifty years later, of that debate? Not much, indeed. Far from disappearing from the architects' radars, **the concept of meaning has become so multiplied and fragmented in recent decades that it no longer allows for precise cultural geography**. New meanings – globalization again, but also the themes of the Anthropocene, gentrification, ecologies, resilience, gender studies, and so on – offer endless possibilities for theorizing. Still, they always link to practices

separate from each other, disconnected, with no possible communication. But they all consider themselves as Architecture. Such fragmentation is also confirmed by the evolution of art theories and **the growing distance between art and market, meaning and experience, perception and understanding**. Yet, despite this overwhelming uncertainty, we continue to design, produce and critique Architecture, and to attribute meanings, intentions and hopes to its forms.

Once again, this issue of PK explores this elusive but, at the same time, inescapable connection between meaning and architecture. It does so according to **three methodological assumptions**. The first is that, far from disappearing, **meaning today vastly exceeds form**. Therefore, it is always and again possible to rediscover and redesign their relationship: a link that changes at varying speeds, according to different systems whose mutual irritation often produces unpredictable changes but exists, nonetheless. The second is that **the theoretical and practical dimensions of architecture cannot be thought of as separate**, except as a Derridean oppositional pair: the project of architecture only exists in its performative dimension and according to the effects that it produces, and to those effects the distinction between project and *architectural* project is as closely as problematically linked. The third is the **systemic dimension of architecture** in its socio-technical-economic conditions: this has always been historically true, but today it implies a constitutive relationship with a pervasive neoliberal system, a confrontation with a productive dimension that erases artisanal tensions, and a changing way for producing the projects, with strong influence on both its conceptions and meaning. The connections between these three assumptions – for example, the **tension between individual action and the systemic dimension, from which the project's tactical and strategic role emerges** – are equally decisive.

THEMATIC SECTIONS

Proposals can address the theme of <u>meaning in architecture from an ontological and epistemological perspective</u>, also with a historical-critical perspective, or fall under one of the four thematic cores enumerated here, also exploring their connections and interrelationships and treating them from different perspectives – historical, theoretical, critical:

- <u>NEW FORMS OF MEANING</u>. Places have always been collectors of the sense of community, both in a symbolic and experiential sense. How do we coordinate the continuous multiplication of real-life or digital forms of socialization (from the metaversal to the visual turn) with the ontological and concrete aspects of design? In the wake of the rhetoric of democratization of communicative, social, and relational processes, is it frankly possible to graft meaning into public space, or do these co-design approaches merely make their participants believe they are doing so? Is it the *process* (or the program) that gives meaning to an architecture whose forms have no relevance but as a technical transposition, or, on the contrary, should architecture be considered and treated as a *palimpsest* that lives indifferently from its uses, just as a neutral backdrop? In between, an infinite nuance of practices and approaches.
- <u>NEW MEANINGS OF FORMS</u>. We want to reflect on those meanings that seem most transversal and substantial in impacting architecture. The first is sustainability: for example, how do we overcome aestheticizing practices and purely performance approaches and develop a

genuinely ecological design dimension? Is this an issue of norms, culture, actions, techniques, methods, forms, strategies, or otherwise? The second is the *design for all* approach*,* which brings together practical issues – such as accessibility – and cultural issues – such as gendered urbanism – and yet, curiously, is substantiated in variously normed bureaucratic limitations: as if the design did not, ontologically, define the limits of *some* freedom. How can we overcome this view, related to the logic of protecting minority groups, to develop the theme of freedom *in* design and *in* form?

- RESILIENCE OF MEANINGS. There is *Architecture* and *architecture*. Most designers worldwide are not concerned with rare "extraordinary" works (auditoriums, churches, museums), that is, the traditional bearers of shared meanings: but rather with ordinary, common, everyday constructions. We are not talking about the experimental and elite ordinary, sometimes explored by leading architects, but precisely about the common practice, whose meaning exists and is substantiated through continuous variations and repetitions – in real estate as well as in slums. Void of the semantic layering of Architecture, an architecture remains: maybe far from the academies and glossy pages, but immensely performative. On an ontological and practical level, is the design of this architecture different from that of Architecture? And how does it evolve, for example looking at the impressive rise of AI software?

- RESILIENCE OF FORMS. The built environment has immense resilience. Of course, rarely this goes along with the uses and meanings of those forms. Unmistakable is the Italian case, cracked between a tension toward regeneration and the need for heritage conservation. Cases like the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara or the Meazza stadium in Milan are just the media highlights of a widespread and inevitably growing problem: the clash between different values and meanings, which overlap *in* forms. Is the answer the quality of the project? Or the correctness of the process? Is it a problem of procedures and decision-makers, or proposals and management? How do increasingly essential and irreconcilable meanings – e.g., enjoyment of historic assets, earthquake safety, energy conservation, cost of interventions, fire and accessibility constraints, and so on – intersect *in* the forms?

In homage to the most distinctive feature of *Meaning in Architecture*, our intention is to promote a circulation of contributions among the authors before publication, to gather reciprocal comments from all authors and provide an opportunity for rejoinder to the comments by the authors themselves. *A debate within the volume, as unique as valuable*.

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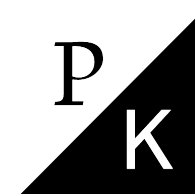
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