



Abraham, Baldeweg, Coenen, Fehn, Holl, Siza, Testa: seven masters for a single gallery. A selection of architecture exhibitions presented in Milan by A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna

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Abstract

The paper proposes the discussion about the disciplinary research on architecture based on the analysis of the experiences brought by seven exhibitions proposed by Francesco Moschini in the gallery A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna, in which the architecture design proves to be crucial for the reflection on architecture making.

Keywords: Project activity. Poetics and representation. Architecture exhibitions.

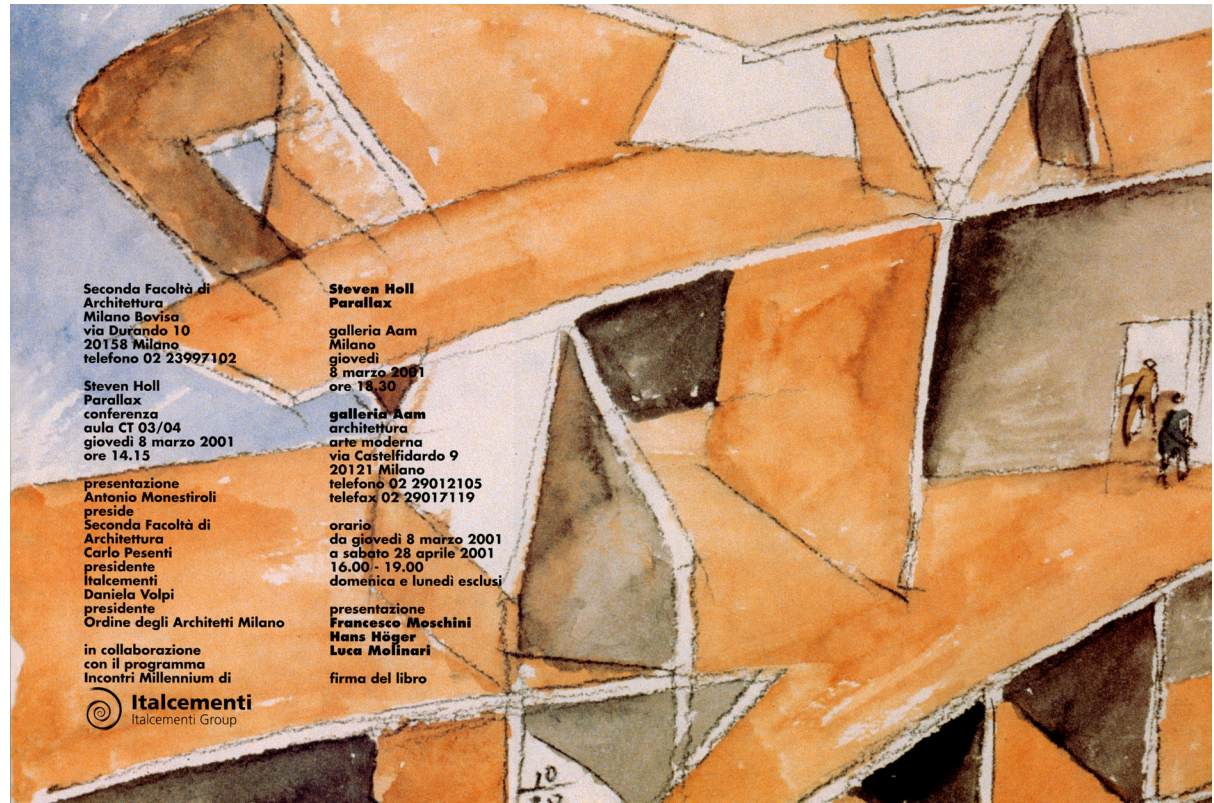


Figure 1: Poster of the conference of Francesco Moschini, Hans Höger and Luca Molinari in the Seconda Facoltà di Architettura Milano Bovisa, on the book by Steven Holl entitled Parallax and the exhibition “Steven Holl Parallax” promoted by Galeria A.A.M. Architettura Modern Art.

In the mid-‘70s, as Manfredo Tafuri’s *Progetto e utopia* invited the architects to put their projects aside, Francesco Moschini with A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna (Figure 1) attempted, in an antagonistic fashion, to bring back dignity to the architecture design and architectural theory, following the path of building a true disciplinary corpus able to collect and read the most visionary experiences of architects as useful times to the project development. During those years, Aldo Rossi was the director the fourteenth Milan Trien-

nial whereas Vittorio Gregotti was the president of the curatorship for the First Venice Biennial. Both institutions immediately seem to relate to the idea of a “drawn architecture”.

In this sense, since the mid-‘60s, the A.A.M. is focused on the theoretical value of the project, setting its own exhibition activities in a strongly conceptual dimension that finds its privileged field of research, especially on architectural design.

Therefore, the choice of creating occasion for reflection on indirect issues about the project development is the common ground of many important architecture exhibitions held by A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna in over forty years of activity. These exhibitions are valuable for offering themselves as occasions for reflection on the poetics and methodologies of architects with the same “inventive and autobiographical” vocation in architecture, although they are associated to different circumstances, times, poetics and geographies.

As a place of conflict and direct confrontation between artistic representation and architectural representation, A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna has set the uniqueness of similar attitudes included in the symbiotic exchange between art and architecture.

The numerous architects engaged by Francesco Moschini (hereinafter assisted by Gabriel Vaduva) are invited to show not simply a definitive documentation of their professional production but the elements and meta-design instruments, testimony of focused poetics to the constant experimentation and joy of digressing.

Drawings, drafts, notes, sculptures, sketches, notebooks and research objects generated by some sort of primary need, a childish demand for playing – those things represent significant and precious moments that illustrate the architect’s need to conform with reality for transcend it in the places of knowledge, desire and figuration.

In the exhibition spaces opened by the A.A.M. opened, first in Rome (1978) and later in Milan (1997), they were brought together to match the vital elements of artistic practice with the completeness of design course, imagining, even beyond a sense in the constructive action of architecture, the abuse and abandonment of the drawing whether in the exegesis of the design, or in the pure representation, in the *rigor mortis* of the line interpreted as a delirious and sometimes bucolic description of the environment.

Thus, during the A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna’s long exhibiting tradition, we can find the instrumental contributions of accurate and specific research that reveal the machinery and the constituent grammars for the writing and the *costruzione logica* of architecture. Aware of the international architectural situation, A.A.M. carries out an expository tradition that by successive steps aims to outline a genealogy of the “autonomous” fundamentals to project and identify, among unique personalities, the linguistic affinities and the crossing “analogical connections”, in an attempt to obtain a precise design identity.

In this sense, i.e., in order to focus on a philological approach that studies the reflective aspects of design, there are seven important samples highlighting the history of Milan A.A.M. headquarters; seven monographic exhibitions dedicated to seven masters of architecture that set up some of the most significant and identity orientations

of contemporary architecture: Álvaro Siza (*Sculpture, The pleasure of work*), Sverre Fehn (*Designs and materials*), Steven Holl (*Parallax*), Raimund Abraham (*Buildings/Images 1990-2000*), Jo Coenen (*Hosting the Book*), Clorindo Testa (*A choice of Architecture Design and others*) and Juan Navarro Baldeweg (*The resonance box*).

Art elevates the thought towards purer, more virginal principles; closer to the puerile and the archaic. When I first started to have the capacity of working with architecture I also felt a great need to be a painter, that is, to make something with my hands, in relation to any other type of thought productivity. (Baldeweg, *Architettura e arte*, 1996).

The exhibition devoted to Juan Navarro Baldeweg presents an essential witness to the architectural design and experimental activity of the Spanish architect, exposing altogether the results of a research revealed by the convergence of architectural design and artistic experiment, between the built solution and the necessary input. The formation of Navarro Baldeweg is deliberately the ambivalent result of a study initiated at Escuela de Bellas Artes de San Fernando and eventually completed at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid. Hence, in his work, the architect / painter reconstructs or invents an intimate relation of reciprocity and interference, a selective correspondence, an *experimentum crucis* between artistic-visual experience and technical-architectural knowledge. This coexistence takes

place both in architectural projects and in sculpture and painting experiments, in a complementary, cooperative and reciprocal fashion.

In the exhibition space, the two dimensions of this synoptic research are measured in a projective way including the complements of the visible universe to return them as correlative art and architecture purposes. Along with his previous shows, J. N. Baldeweg concurrently exposes a series of elements / sculpture, *Works of light / works of hand / works of gravity*, along with two architectural projects, the *Teatro del Canal de Madrid* and the *Music Palace and theatrical arts of Vitoria- Gasteiz*.

The protagonists of this show are gears, inventions and mockups placed on a large plane surface. There are, for example, *Five light units (Light boxes)* which are presented in the significant 1976 arrangement and the installation *Light and metals* in Vinçon room, Barcelona. On that occasion, in fact, a compilation was made gathering the results of a study on the subject of gravity, which is understood and treated as a relative and revealing agent that allows changing the Cartesian conditions of the environment in order to change perceptions and vision. Space is thought as an imaginary circumstance that induces the viewer to blur reality in order to be subject to the illusion itself. In the project for the *Music Palace and theatrical arts of Vitoria- Gasteiz*, the light becomes the cause or the pretext for the realization of a “superstructure” made of aluminum and steel, in



Figure 2: Environment of the Steven Holl Parallax exhibition

which part of the building assumes a shielding function. At the same time, this enormous filter is proposed as an evocative signal of a sculptural component, demonstrating how the work of Baldeweg can be understood as *synthèse des arts majeurs* and can be compared to architects such as Henry Van de Velde, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto or Carlo Scarpa.

This gesture refers to the calligraphic sculptures presented in Francesco Moschini's space, placed on a large mirror that produces, by the duplication of objects, a reciprocal allusion that liberates the uniqueness of the object or the same equal external influences. If, on one hand, autonomy exalts the figure of the object, on the other, its apparent multiplicity introduces the movement, or the *eye movement*, into spatial perception as organic law governing the project development lines.

This same sensorial quality, with a more theoretical and metaphorical connotation, is found in the projects exposed in the exhibition dedicated to Steven Holl. The phenomenological dimensions of architecture, also for Holl, depend on the scientific-cognitive parameters of perception. In fact, as he writes, "the movement of the body crossing the overlapping perspectives formed within spaces is the essential connection between us and architecture" (*Parallax*, 2000). By the launch of his book *Parallax*, Steven Holl presents to A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna a selection of architectural projects and exhibits,

including mockups and models for study, numerous sketches and watercolor drawings.

Also in this case, the exposition space is proposed as some kind of "ideal microcosm" where we can reconstruct the "uniqueness" of the architect's work. The exhibition provides the opportunity to look closely at the success of a differentiated research that moves within specific insights on the relationship between theory and design, concept and form. (Figure 2)

Holl's reflections are fulfilled in the numerous paper sheets painted in watercolor according to a usual practice of inventive or cognitive exercise representing the ordaining instrument of a *phenomenon* or a vision from the idea.

Holl does numerous approaches to the artistic world: he cooperates with V. Acconci, is influenced by B. Viola's digital art, contacts with D. Oppenheimer and is aware, in a special way, of the *environmental* art by J. Turrell. His research — oriented to the treatment of light understood as intervention focused on perception — represents for the American architect an important unit of measure to determine his own experience of light, space and matter.

Marked by the very need for a parallel path between artistic experimentation and architectural design, Álvaro Siza's research is conducted on the threshold of an ongoing investigation on the "essential terms" of architecture.

The presentation of this architect's design activity by A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna focuses on a peculiar theme, that is, the relationship with sculpture.

Working between art and architecture is also a key feature of Siza's work, which, as Baldeweg's describes, through the generous exercise of sculpture "meets an intimate need to act, to express more rapidly."

To the Portuguese architect, the sculptures as well as the sketches represent the self-reflexive and "inflexibly analytical" instruments with which one must simultaneously combine the gestures of everyday life and the effects of the imaginary, satisfying the needs of enthusiasm and foreboding.

"Every design of mine," Siza writes, "was supposed to capture precisely a concrete moment of a fleeting image in all its nuances. Insofar it can grasp this fleeting quality of reality, the design will sprout more or less clearly and will be as vulnerable as precise." Siza's *fast designs* emerge from the desire to know and contemplate reality, the constant need to confront everyday life. They are improvised and spontaneous dialogues with places and things around the theme of the building and its concreteness. "Testimonies of everyday questions, small progress and errors, of the abandonment of an idea and the resume of something different from the same idea" (Siza) his *graphic pastiches* are, as Purini says, "the architect's specific view of the world," and represent

the irreplaceable experiential practice in the formulation of the architectural idea.

Siza's sculptures and the corresponding sketches shown in the gallery bear witness to how this "capricious endeavor" is a spontaneous and necessary diversion that assumes an exclusive role in the practice of his *poetic profession*.

Therefore, conceived from the restlessness of the graphic gesture, the sculptures reveal – through their plastic linearity stripped of ornaments – a style that considers simplicity as wealth. The matter dealt with an "artisan feeling" is enlivened by the anonymous expression of "unusual actions" represented by *unidentified bodies of unknown* characters (as seen in the titles of the works). They are small statues, "archaeological citations", findings of lost innocence, revealing, by their uncertainty and ambiguity, the aspirations of the sign or creative dream.

"Surviving to the dream" that, like *kouroi*, paralyzed in harsh, votive and resigned positions ("but always available to continuity"), they seem to come to the surface, between mystery and archaism, of the stratigraphies of time, as veteran fragments, surviving forms of memory.

In these plays - writes Baldeweg - we recognize a first archaic impulse, with no style or date. They have lightness and a scale that remind us of many vernacular images. They do not want

anything. Gesticulating with embryonic arms and feet, they emerge as puppets of men and animals, with internal resources, like vacillating puppets [...] These works solve the characteristic problem of sculpture, that is, to have access to the area of the visual horizon touching the ground and leaning on the soil.

Indeed supported by pedestals, their movements are very idealized and exalted in the desire to become perfect objects “between earthly space and infinite space.” Those supports or bases are “the necessary counterpoint to lightness” and represent the needed part of the *formal system* as in Brancusi’s sculptures.

These plastic experiences are empathically reflected in their architectures, which inevitably assert themselves with a strong sculptural identity. This is how, for example, in the piezometric tower of University of Aveiro, one can read in the refined structure the static conditions of lightness and a puzzle of expressed signs in Giacometti’s *figures* (this memory is even more evident in the lines of the preliminary sketches).

And if sculpture and design compose the sound – the dimension that must reflect the desires and delights of an “anxiously lonely life,” – his architectures use these inquiries to add irony to the implacable realism of the everyday life in the worlds surrounding and going through them.

Sverre Fehn’s poetic vision (less romantic) is equally sophisticated. For his exhibition at A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna some sketches were assembled and presented to underline again the importance of these forms of preventive observation or “design forecasting” to the consubstantiality between idea, design and construction. Collected on numerous books and notebooks and “marked” on the insistent view of the ship, the present sketches enliven the metaphorical view of navigation, architectural digression, which is understood as nostalgic architect awareness of finding himself powerless in face of the immeasurable sea, a “visible surface, infinitely rich with analogies, of the arcane reality of things” (Pavese).

In the land-sea dualism, the foundations underlying the ideation and conception of many of Sverre Fehn’s works are noted.

The *constructive thinking* of the Norwegian architect, with “internationalist orientation”, is based on the fundamental principles of modern architecture. In his work, the echoes of Miesian rationalism resound (in the affinity to order and symmetry in classical inspiration and minimalist vocation), the organic laws of Wright (as correspondence between form and nature as realistic expression and how to use natural materials “properly”), Le Corbusier’s plastic discipline (the tendency to spatial dynamism, purism and conciliatory vision of tradition and technology) and also Louis Kahn’s traditionalist trends and Carlo Scarpa’s exhibition experiences.

Part of Fehn's *poetic* modernism arises from these assumptions, which translates the experiences of the past into a new, diverse, essentially more *primitive* "order".

"The primitive architecture can be compared to the modern architecture", as we can read in the article *Maroccan Primitive Architecture*, where Fehn collects impressions of his trip to Morocco in 1952. He describes the pivotal nature of the buildings in that country and is amazed by the way *constructive logic*, clarity and simplicity meet the peculiar characteristics of the tradition of modern functionalism.

I find things that lead me to find myself. Today, visiting Morocco to study the primitive architecture is not like traveling to meet new things. As a matter of fact, we do nothing else but recognize. As when we look at Frank Lloyd Wright's house at Taliesin – a fragmented entity whose materials have the same rudeness. The same must happen with Mies van der Rohe's walls. The same character with no limits. And the poetry of Le Corbusier hanging gardens.

Just as African sculptures represent *reality* for Picasso, the architectures of Morocco represent *modernity* for Fehn. The essence, logic and naturalness of those buildings are reflected in his poetry, materializing the anatomical integrity of the project with reality, time, place and light.

In his Corbusian trip to the past, Fehn discovers the elementary forms and the few elements found in the source of architecture that consent returning to its *zero degree*, the "cosmogony attempt to renewal, reconstructing of the conditions of early days" (Rykwert) in *order to restart*.

On the designs exposed, the sign becomes a search – a mystical and sensuous search of the invisible or indefinite traits of a parallel course consonant to the project's course, the only possible way to reach the *reconstructive* conquer of architecture. "In his way of constructing, the primitive seems to be as simple and logical as nature." By paraphrasing this assertion, it can be said that in his way of designing, Fehn seems to be as simple and logical as the primitive. In fact, the dashed features of his sketches appear as Neolithic incisions, adhering to an idiomatic writing that arises from the need to transpose, in figure, the somatic *characteristics* of things or primary ideas, to truly understanding them.

With the exhibition dedicated to Clorindo Testa, on the occasion of his laureate *honoris causa* granted by Università di Roma "La Sapienza", A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna of Rome aims to combine – through a careful choice of designs and projects – the operative and theoretical elements that contribute to the definition of an architecture understood not as stagnation of the language itself, but as a multidisciplinary concatenation of many reference systems to which the design of the project belongs indirectly.

Clorindo Testa develops his research giving equal importance to architectural and artistic representation. His painting records the conditioning of memory and knowledge and reveals the specific values and expressive contents of each eventual operation. Art goes to architecture leading to the mobilization of the linguistic code according to an evocative process of insemination of paper sheet, space and thought.

Observing reality and questioning the imaginary, Clorindo Testa finds in painting “the privileged laboratory of light, accidental forms, sometimes extracted from the humorous and surreal subconscious” (Ignasi de Solá-Morales).

The Italian-Argentine architect’s constant focus on figuration and, therefore, on the re-figuration (of elements and episodes, either mythical or real), represents the essential premise of an autobiographical and historicist poetics, that finds its specificity in the complementary juxtaposition of factors or thoughts from many sources. From these interactions, as well as from the complicity of new confrontations or conflicts, derive the constituent elements of Clorindo Testa’s work.

The experience of painting, parallel to the experience of architecture, is always a figurative research, but not abstract by convention. The figure is a representation of a whole content and certain values linked to the emotional, individual or personal realm, to the decisions of the pro-

ject and not to the mechanical and purely typological aspect. (C. Testa)

The role of *figurative research* is, in fact, decisive to the formal definition of Testa’s architecture. The continuous use of imagination and pictorial invention always translates into a personal determination of complex and articulate constructive solutions, filled with “references and relations with life” but always linked to a subtle irony (understanding, writes L. Semerani, “as an autocratic weapon of an architect who does not want to be monumental”).

A direct consequence of the pictorial experience and humorous line is the continuous reference to the allegorical dimension that Clorindo Testa makes when describing his works. So, for example, *las manos y las legs* becomes the figurative expression to identify the pillars or columns that support the Bank of London and South America or the National Library.

Every new project designed for the city needs to compensate the ways of society, culture and use, as well as measure with the organization of the whole. This constitutes the predominant feature of the project’s criteria presented in the exhibition dedicated by A.A.M. to Jo Coenen. His design activity is continuously on the practice of design, in reducing the idea to lines. The figure is completed, in fact, by the visual and concrete deposition of primary and constitutive dimensions of architecture.

The correlation between design, as a gesture of research, and architecture, as immediate and decipherable reality of technical and executive works, is presented by Jo Coenen as a little far away, as if one or the other mode of action of the representation could break the separation whether ideological (referring to the entire history of architectural representation) or disciplinary (when the two forms of research cannot be seen separately). However, the sketches do not constitute an autonomous value corpus concerned with constructive “rationalization”. Consequently, Jo Coenen’s designs on display retake a stereotype of comic book reality, tending to signal the end result or even the introduction of architecture into urban landscape. This happens, therefore, with a tranquility of the graphic act marked by self-complacency in the forms because it is provoked by an organizational process of space.

Compared to Sverre Fehn’s designs, a reassuring view is strongly recommended, but semi-defining the volumes on an urban context. Fehn’s drawings, in fact, evoke from the beginning the connotation of a description that is not prerogative of the constructible, presented in a more elegant fashion also in the presentation that in Coenen’s work, on the contrary, is melancholy given back or that surrenders, perhaps deliberately, to the reality of the composition process.

Coenen’s designs derive from a systematic and instinctive methodology in which the obsessive

continuity of the sign assumes specific connotations, outlining and simplifying the formal and spatial behavior of construction.

“Here I grow flowers that never die, I have seen dolls whose breath never ceases, whose movements never cease. Here the chromatism scents, and the walls are represented in immeasurable dimensions”. This same value set by Rob Krier to the pictorial representations is restored in the Coenen’s figurative intention. In the lucid consistency of his representation, in fact, reads the desire to “figure” in a single moment, the complex structural and distributive iconography of the project in practical and timely manner, repairing the flattery of each easy suggestion and dependency.

From the four library projects exposed in the Milanese headquarters of A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna, we can grasp the meaning of this attitude as well as the dynamics of the choices and results set up for each one of these four exercises. The projects for the Center Céramique and Biblioteca di Maastricht (1995), for Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (2001), for the Biblioteca Europea di Informazione e Cultura to Milano (2001) and for the Public Library in Dortmund (1995) are presented in the various phases of the project through numerous designs, sketches, photographs, renderings and models restoring the sense of a thematic research developed around the idea of housing the book.

A less “deliberative” and more material feeling is found between fierce and obsessive signs of Raimund Abraham’s troubled graphics. His designs, real and concrete expressions of the imaginary and the absurd, seem to revoke the “phases” of a genesis of architecture or a return to their origins. Exposed on the walls of A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna, these “deserter studies” bring architecture back – in its ambiguity – to a preliminary dimension, to its own nature of imagined matter.

A design is for me a model oscillating between mind and physical, built reality of architecture. It is not a step towards that reality, but an autonomous act that anticipates the concreteness of the idea itself. An architectural design can never be an illustration, but must submit to its own constructive laws that reveal the idea of their intrinsic syntactic form, through the grammar of lines. The line intends the precision of geometry, while the stratification of the pigments and its tessitura express the internal and external quality of matter. The first sign on a blank sheet, the first notch on a stone, and the first incision on a metal plate represent the beginning of architecture. Designing is to focus an idea on a body, violating its silence.

The incision Abraham talks about sets the attempt to consummate the matter to come – with subtraction processes – to the self-revelation, to its infringed order. This painful denial frees the memory and the desire for the surface materiality to bring

to light the ultimate allusion to the symbol of myth. Thus, in these designs, fractures, cuts and topographical passages reveal, by some sort of telluric request, the elementary forms of architecture between natural and artificial, real and imaginary.

Idea and matter are the polarities of architecture. They have different fates. For the thinking, the idea has to prevail. Matter becomes refusal. The idea is the manifestation of thought, totally enclosed and protected from the power of its inventor, but violated by the intention of its pursuit and its resulting realization. The expression of thought is silenced as soon as it is pronounced, while the silence of matter is violated by its own fate of decay. Matter can survive its own destiny only by means of the memory of desire: an adventure through the real and the imaginary, an adventure of work searching for itself.

Abraham’s works refer to the states of architecture in the constructive and compositional temporality, therefore, in the very nightmare of an uncontrollability of the architectural gesture. In these works, there are pending forms mainly towards the artistic and sculptural ideal, but also towards a lightness of the thought of visible comprehension in ornamental forms or, more precisely, related to Massimo Scolari’s work. The drawings, above all, give life to architectural visions, so it is possible to grasp the Abraham’s monistic vocation, leading to visibility the multiple forms of imaginary: the unknown, the unexpected, the

surprising. This representation of the origin along with the destination, of dream along with memory, triggered by fantasy acts, reveals the project in its dimension of pure architectural object (for example, as it happens for the project of Torre Della Sapienza, 1980).

That dreamy-romantic dimension, used as image catalyst, refers theoretically, not officially, to “turning their backs” in Caspar David Friedrich, or even, says Abraham, to the “topography crash,” to “desolate landscapes”, therefore, to the” ultimate desire to make architecture”. ■