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ELEMENTS OF INTERIOR ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AGAINST STYLISH APPROACHES

Ioanni Delsante

The importance of this book is related to different reasons. Firstly it deals with interior architectural design that is a key topic in architectural practice even if it is a neglected subject in most schools of architecture nowadays as *"interior design is often misunderstood as only a kind of decoration"*.^[1] On the contrary, as Prof. Chen Yi states, *"we believe that interior design and architectural design were indistinguishable since the beginning of the civilization"*.^[2]

As a matter of fact interior space is *"the space enclosed by walls, wherever they are arranged or configured. It is primary and characterizing of every architectural work, it is addressed to the fruition by whom it is going through, crossing or stopping; [...] it has a meaning clearly distinct from that of the other figurative arts..."*.^[3]

Moreover this publication deals with Chinese architects from Tongji and it looks forward to deepening the cultural relationships between Chinese and Italian architectural debates that also is one of the aims of the editing this book series.

Before expressing an opinion about the published projects in the book I think that it must be understood the social, economic and social context that generated them.

Finally I think the best contribution to the Tongji's group of scholars working on interior design is to express our scientific opinion on the results of their design activity thinking at it as an on going research process, and having clearly in mind both historical and contemporary references.

I am convinced that the positive exchange that this book will provide could be proportional to the mutual contamination it



Fig 2 Galleria Spada designed by Francesco Borromini

will create into different approaches. This does not simply mean that Chinese and Italian side should combine each other, as I strongly believe the two Schools can enrich each other by mutual knowledge and relationship without any compromise or loss of identity. The enrichment is given just if there is any loss in terms of identity and consciousness with our own cultural history, both in terms of personal and collective perspectives.

Some of the most clearly emerging features from Tongji's scholars can be summarized as: following the 3R principle and design spaces to reuse buildings; pay attention to technology to integrate technological application with sustainable design; emphasize dynamic design to guarantee flexibility and space changeability; express Chinese culture taking inspiration from local culture; finally emphasizing the sense and meaning of space, also with clear relationships with external environment, materials and construction modes.

So, after looking at the selected projects, I naturally think about the "tools" used by the designers, and I try to understand which are the "architectural elements" that have been used to define and characterize the quality of interior spaces. My mind is constantly working by references, looking for projects to be evoked. So I try to underline some very special features that come to my mind, as spatial organization, use of materials, use of light and, linking different topics, the relationship with "tradition" and "modernity".

First of all it is to underline that architectural interiors are always connected with clear dimension of spaces and their perception. Most of the selected projects define well organized spaces, thanks to the general distribution or to the geometrical proportions. The capability of working with space in interior design it is very important because it deals with visual perception, with using natural or artificial light, and with other architectural features that bring the idea of interior design far away from that of simply decoration.

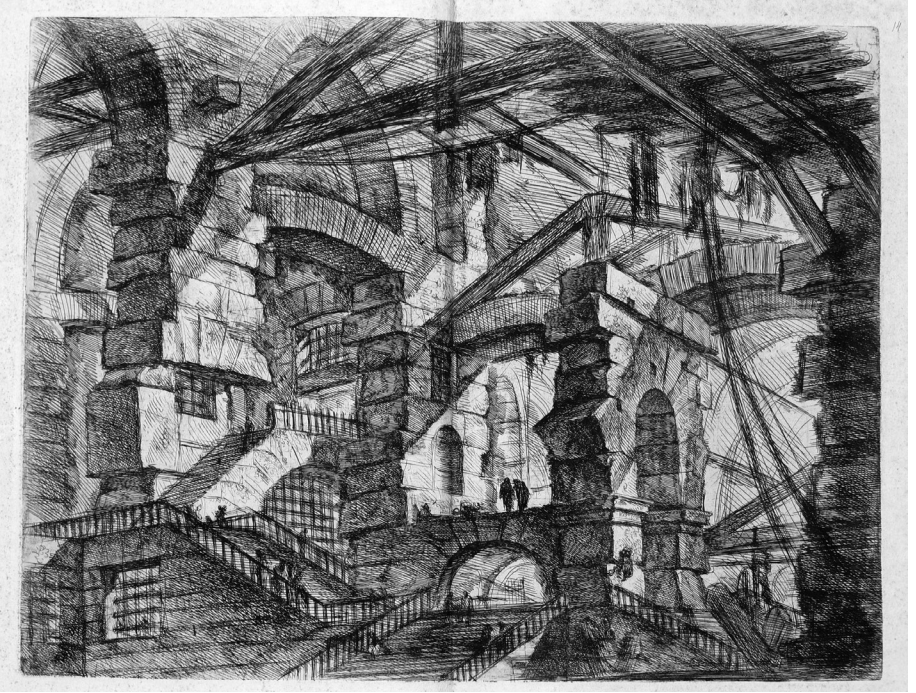


Fig 3 Drawing by Giovanni Battista Piranesi



Fig 4 Villa Karma designed by Adolf Loos

Deepness perception, for example, is function of our visual capacities that are also biologically “trained” and educated to perceive the architectural space and perspectives in a precise way. This is very clear thinking from the moment in which men understood the rules of geometrical perspective, so that starting from then he could also effects artificially to emphasize or reduce perspective’s perception. Apse of Bramante (1444-1514) in San Satiro (Fig1), for example, recreates a sense of perspective that is created by protruding elements and pictorial decoration, while Spada gallery of Borromini (1599-1667) emphasises the prospective effect of the rising path. (Fig 2)

Some centuries later, and thanks also to the drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), the idea of space has become even more complex and could not be defined from just a unique point of view, by overcoming the idea of the central perspective and the static vision related to that. (Fig 3)

But dealing with the idea and the dimensioning of space is still linked with the spatial definition of the “interior” with its boundaries. Following the ideas already expressed by Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968), it is understandable that thanks to the avant-gardes and the Modern movement the idea itself of interior space was put under discussion, leading to some very important “manifestos” by deleting, moving, shading the traditional edges of buildings: for example Mies Van de Rohe in his villas or in the Barcelona’s Pavilion found a new way of managing architectural space.

Moreover I’d like to underline the topic of “material”, and Chen Yi proposes to start from the idea of Tectonic and from his consequences in terms of *“texture, construction mode and structural style of the materials themselves”*.

I’d like to think again at the works of Adolf Loos (1870-1933) for some cafeterias in Vienna and who developed the theme of material through the principle of *“cladding”*: *“Every material possesses a formal language which belongs to it alone and no*



Fig 5 Villa Karma designed by Adolf Loos

material can take on the forms proper to another. As these forms develop out of each individual material's potential for application and from the building procedures proper to it, they have grown up with and through the material".^[4]

Loos's ornamental conception was declared, for example, in the wardrobe of Villa Karma in which its beauty was not expressed by decorations but only by the wood itself. While in the library at the second floor of this house the architect used different colours of marble for shelves and floor and wood for ceiling; this use of materials creates a sense of flattened space and emphasized the relationship between inner space and the outside. (Fig 4) (Fig 5)

After this long premise I finally express some brief considerations about the selected works, that are very different one each other: I think it is positive as it demonstrates that Tongji's scholars are not looking for a "style" but they work on architectural features.

I am glad to see some projects of renewal and reuse of existing buildings, as I think this goal cannot be addressed mainly to foreign architects, in spite of some meaningful case studies as the new Rockbund Art Museum by David Chipperfield (1953-) on the Bund. If we recall also the recent designing of creative centres inside of old factories or production sites, I am convinced that Chinese architects will soon develop original approaches to this very important topic that nowadays represents the most of working opportunities in European countries, due to economic crisis and lack of investments. Another important issue I'd like to mention is the use of materials that shows the will to keep both sustainability or the relationship with local traditions: bamboo, wood and curtain are just some of the examples that can easily express these features.

Many designers also are underlining the relationships between "*the interior environment and the architectural environment, the outdoor environment and even the urban environment*", so the discussion seems to me even enlarged and shifted on the relationship between

man and landscape that is again defined through the mutual relationships between “interior” and “exterior” space.

It must be taken into consideration that people will need also new kind of spaces to spend their free time, to enjoy the relationship with landscapes or to get in touch with nature. One of the designers’ goals will be to create new spaces for new kind of needs and habits nowadays we cannot entirely forecast.

As in the Information Technology age one of the risks is that society will not need Architecture as the science to represent the fixed scene of human life, some of the projects show as man still needs spaces with quality to relax, to enjoy, to think and to also to work. Today life’s conditions are changing very fast both in rural and urban contexts and Chinese society is also changing both in terms of habits and of expectations: I think Chinese architects must especially take into consideration these conditions and provide good answers to be expressed in architectural terms, even if still working also with the “traditional” elements of architecture.

Far away from fashion architectures and archistars, I think that Tongji scholars are showing to us through these selected projects some meaningful tools that we should take into consideration within the international debate.

References:

[1] Y. Chen, *Young interior architects in Shanghai*, Santarcangelo di Romagna, Maggioli Editore, 2014, 43-59.

[2] ibid

[3] L. Finelli, inside of *DEAU (Dictionary of Architecture and Urban design)*, 1969.

[4] A. Loos, *Ornament and Crime*, 1908.