BEYOND THE 'HOUSE OF LANGUAGE'[1]
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Abstract: This paper departs from a critique on the post-modern semiotic interpretation of architectural language and replaces the understanding of architecture as a symbolic and formal practice by the understanding that architecture contributes to urban space production as part of an economic and political process. This would indicate a shift from what architectural language represents to how it 'acts' in reality. In the analysis of Pizzagalli's London Prison project that follows, first architectural language is shown as a constructive act that orders reality in order to understand it, meaning architecture's political role in the construction of the city is to offer a criticism of reality through architectural language. Secondly, Pizzagalli's design strategy of voids is contrasted with the aesthetic interpretation of city voids as signifying decline. Instead, Pizzagalli's voids form a space for tension and potentiality. In conclusion, an architectural re-reading of residual city spaces from a distance is proposed, potentially revealing unexpected urban and territorial sets of relationships.

Key words: architecture, space, language, void

'... a Mondrian painting is not an image of order but an ordering of things', G.C. Argan, 'Architettura e arte non-figurativa', in *Progetto e destino*, Il Saggiatore, Milan, 1965.

'... Points, lines, areas or volumes establish the syntax of sites. All language becomes an alphabet of sites...' Robert Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site', *Artforum*, June1967.

The critical and cognitive role of architectural language in the modernist tradition strongly affected, though in different ways, the architect's commitment to society. This matter deserves reconsideration now that the theme of autonomy of the architectural 'text', introduced by the postmodern discourse, has marginalised theoretical reflection on the contemporary urban project; a reflection that for a period of time animated the European architectural debate from the Gregotti-directed pages of *Casabella*.[2]

Today we are witnessing a progressive divergence between architectural practice, solidly locked within the symbolic sphere, and the mechanisms of space production, considered 'other' by architecture, since they are strongly affected by markets and political decisions. Increasingly, this separation seems to be a conceptual fracture between the dominion of form - degraded to a tool for representation - and that of processes, which seem to have become an exclusive matter for politics and strategic planning.

Conversely, in the recent debate on urban transformation, the crucial role of design research has been pointed out as a way to better understand how society andthe economy are reorganising the 'form of the territory'.[3] As a matter of fact, the discussion calls into question the increasingly self-referential nature of architecture's formal strategies, and requires further critical reflection on the agency of architectural language in the process of urban construction. How do the issues related to the urban project affect the traditional boundaries and categories of architectural language? Indeed, there are no immediate and exhaustive answers to this question, but, as a commentary to *Spaces, Poetics and Voids*, it seems important to return our attention to how architectural language can act as a tool for spatial investigation, in accordance with the fundamental link that connects the genesis of the language of art to a process of understanding reality.[4]

It was Manfredo Tafuri who, at the end of the 1970s, raised the question connected to the theme of language. In his analysis of the work of certain post World War II architects, he challenged the tendency to consider the universe of forms as a closed system which, through its infinite self-reproduction, ratified its own programmatic, and perhaps fatal, incapacity to affect the 'structural' conditions of urban and territorial construction. His argument signalled the progressive and

conscious intellectual estrangementof many architects from the conditions that govern the production and the processes of the transformation of inhabitable space. According to Tafuri, they were backtracking along the path trodden by certain exponents of architectural modernity, who had been committed to reforming the discipline in close alliance with planning practices and building production systems.

Drawing on certain passages from Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer*, Tafuri indicated the need to shift attention from what a work 'wishes to be' or 'wishes to say' to how it relates to the economy, society and the capitalistic organisation of the territory. A return to this principle makes evident the will to reclaim the authentic 'function' of architectural language through a significant shift from what language represents to how language (taken in a metaphoric sense) 'acts' within reality, while simultaneously being determined by reality itself.

Tafuri's reflection was also a radical investigation into how architecture could exert a critical role, not just as a science of signs abandoning itself to the abuses of 'writing', but also as *'techné'*, which roots itself in society and its emerging conflicts. This is a question which is likely to resurface today in increasingly evident forms, particularly if we compare the space of the actual city – which continues to reproduce itself through mechanisms alien to the logic of architecture – with the symbolic redundancy on which architectural objects base their dialogue with the city, reciting therhetoric of complexity, fragmentation and flexibility, or farcically re-proposing the non-figurative language of the avant-garde.

With reference to the present urban condition, it might be appropriate to draw on Tafuri's investigation into the function of architectural language in order to re-evaluate the role of 'intellectual mediator' that architectural knowledge can play with regard to new social conflicts, political responsibility and the construction of the city as a common good.

In the course of this analysis of Simone Pizzagalli's work, I would like to focus primarily on two aspects. The first is inherent in the constructive function of architectural language, intended in its broader sense as a procedure that orders reality with the aim of understanding it. Here, language is considered primarily as a tool for knowledge production. This understanding of architectural language is far removed from the idea of an 'autonomous' architecture, which asserts itself through a path of linguistic purification, a notion deriving from a revival of the concept of the 'autonomy of the political' that was theorised in the 1960s.[5] In this sense, an analysis of the prison space designed by Pizzagalli will be useful in clarifying the meaning of a language that is both critical and constructive.

The second aspect emphasises Pizzagalli's investigation of the void as a design strategy. I propose the hypothesis that an authentic, analytic reflection on architectural language is not just a reworking or undermining of pre-existing expressive codes, but presupposes a constant 'openness' towards examining the transformations occurring within the entirety of the built environment. These transformations are the expression of different ways of living, of a new geography of powers, and of a different rationale of techniques and constructive processes that strongly affect the field of architecture.

LANGUAGE AS CONSTRUCTION: A PRISON IN THE HEART OF THE CITY
Contrary to what has been theorised in recent decades, the political role of architecture in the construction of the city and the architect's commitment should not be understood as a criticism of language, but as a criticism of reality through architecture's own specific language. The difference is substantial. A criticism of language is aimed at architectural form as a self-enclosed system of signs, such as in the historicist revival of post-modern architecture or in the aesthetics of deconstruction, where as a criticism of reality penetrates the dense and magma-like depths of reality from within the language of architecture itself. Through this change of perspective, architectural form is never the ultimate goal of criticism, rather it is one of its tools.

The project for a prison in the heart of the city is without a doubt a political action. Yet its political value only partially depends on the building's specific programme; namely, the decision to use a vacant space in the centre of London's business district for the construction of a prison. The critical and political dimension of this building is strictly connected to its formal structure: a regular volumetric composition of full and empty spaces, which declares its own alterity with respect to the surrounding context, and reinterprets the space of reclusion as an area exposed

to the city but also one that allows the city to be observed from within.

’Void and repetition’ have been adopted as key elements in the construction of the architectural language of this building. The systematic and serial use of the ‘empty interval’ breaks the object’s integrity as a ‘shell’, enabling a three-dimensional visual frame to emerge, formed by minimal compositional units. The cells, piled to form vertical blades, also constitute the weight-bearing structure of the building. The regular alternation of empty and full spaces transforms the space of reclusion, which is usually strongly secluded, into a space permeable to sight. Thus, the building establishes an unconventional and ambiguous dialogue with the urban context: it maintains its own institutional status of enclave, while the city, directly visible from within, becomes a concrete presence in the prison.

As with serial music, the rhythm created by the ‘breaks’ between the vertical blades alludes to an investigation into the economy of form. Yet, similarly to what can be said about minimalist art, this economy is not synonymous with simplicity of form,but with the ability to articulate a complex programme and a great variety of spatial situations, starting with few ‘materials’ and a few essential moves. The interval is functional in the construction of ‘difference and repetition’,[6] which assume the task of organising the internal complexity of the prison space without relinquishing an image of the whole. The three-dimensional texture is constructed by superimposing different spatial sequences in which serial elements alternate with cross cuts: large spaces dug into the building mass for the collective activities of the prison. Therefore, the prison space does not represent the alienation of subjectivity. On the contrary, it is a spatial device centred on the individual who experiences it, who encounters different situations in a continuous sensory dialogue with the city.

And finally, it is not by chance that in the presentation of the work more emphasis was placed on the design process than on the final outcome, a process which, through its unfolding, identifies its own specific formal logic, and contrasts with the intellectualistic application of a pre-existing expressive code. Recognising the ongoing instability of the form[7] – opening the language to the field of experience, well away from the closed circle of representation – is implicit in the empiricism of the procedure.

In light of this project, and drawing on the recent discussion of the linguistic analogy in architecture,[8] we can assert that if a similarity exists, it is not between language and the constructed work, but between ‘making’ architecture and the construction of language.The analogy is therefore not based on a semiological interpretation of architecture; i.e., on what architecture says, represents or signifies, but on the manner in which it organises its actual materials through formal structures. From this point of view, the expressive substance of architecture, or rather, the materials and elements that architecture organises in space, do not constitute a conventional code as in language,rather they define themselves only a posteriori through a direct confrontation with reality,through the concreteness of the work or the project.

TWO PARALLEL TEXTS
The formal structure of the prison can be understood as the result of a more general reflection on the architectural interpretation of the void, both as a physical presence and as a conceptual image.

As I have already suggested, Simone Pizzagalli emphasises the empiricism of his design investigation. The compositional process[9] unfolds through a sequence of diagrams that reveal the conceptual genesis of the project through the interaction between writing and drawing. Analogous to the ‘lists’ of Georges Perec, the written texts are mainly lists of nouns that reproduce in a literal form the chaotic experience of the places encountered: the areas immediately surrounding the East London Railway Line stations. The sequence of diagrams, in which we find references to both minimalism and conceptual art, from Sol Lewitt to Dan Graham, gives rise to progressive overlapping and contamination between drawing and the written word. Pizzagalli contrasts the city’s fragmentary nature – represented by words naming the disordered succession of spaces and heterogeneous objects, whose significance seems to have been lost for good – with erasures, intervals, interruptions and excavations within the compact mass of words, so that various configurations of the void as a potential spatial structure are allowed to emerge. A new spatial narrative is explored through this contamination, one where void and repetition become the major instruments of the composition. But in the continuous and chaotic flow of sensations

stemming from the experience of the city, the interruptions constituted by abandoned or residual areas, such as the one chosen for the prison, allow one to glimpse the possibility of an additional and wider story, one that goes beyond the dimension of the architectural object.

These nameless spaces where the fabric of the city is interrupted, areas of physical and social decay from which every meaning or value seems to have vanished, have in recent years provided a field of investigation for photographers, filmmakers and anthropologists, all of whom have contributed to the construction of a new urban imagery connected to an aesthetic of marginality and 'formlessness', reflecting the crisis and dissolution of the city's form as a value. The reclamation of these spaces has often been associated with their 'rediscovery' through neo-Situationist practices, or actions of temporary and informal re-appropriation, in search of a form of sociality that is free from conditioning and therefore more 'authentic'. Nevertheless, these multiple 'resistance tactics' have difficulty translating themselves into a real critical alternative to the construction of the city. The alterity of these nameless spaces, once sublimated into an image or into the theatricality of the Situationist event, is ready to be absorbed by the incessant reproduction of the 'generic city', where every difference,every conflict or value, appears to have been eradicated.

With respect to these interpretations, I feel a different intent in Simone Pizzagalli's work: the decision to consider the void as a strategy for an alternative, morphological reading of the city. Interpreting the urban context starting from its derelict areas entails removing these spaces from the sphere of representation in order to concentrate on their concrete structural form, on their actual physical 'existence'.

From this point of view, the void is not perceived as an absence or symbol of decline (of form and value), but rather as a space loaded with tensions and potentialities, a place where a variety of fragmentary traces have accumulated which are open to new interpretations. Voids are part of the city, and contemporaneously, they are places where everyday rhythms are suspended and where 'silence' emerges as a conceptual image to be explored through design. As Simone Pizzagalli puts it: '... silence is what distinguishes a void from an empty space. The absence of any rational and conclusive formal value is a sign of the rich potential and profound otherness of the void.Its capacity to evoke analogous meanings and forms in our memory and imagination defines a void as an excavation into all the possible formal and overlapping interpretations of a space, whether realised or hypothetical.'10

Conserving the otherness of these spaces without falling into the romantic contemplation of their marginality is an issue the contemporary city presents to architectural design. Hence, in *Spaces, Poetics and Voids* we find allusions to artists who have worked on 'the void as technique', from Gordon Matta-Clark to Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana. To these we can add the 'silences' of Mies van der Rohe's urban projects.In the works of these artists, the strategic use of silence and void express a subversive potential: void and silence become the linguistic tools of a critical stance towards reality and the mechanisms of its reproduction.

NARRATIVE SHIFTS

Finally, the question I am posing is how the issues related to the void as a technique, which Pizzagalli has analysed in his project, could become the subject of an architectural investigation that critically affects the construction of the city. The map of London after the Great Fire of 1666, which Pizzagalli presents in his introduction, is a powerful analogy for what happens within today's city. Abandoned infrastructures, vacant open spaces, fragments of agricultural land and former industrial sites are some of the most relevant features of contemporary urban space. They are the residual products of different processes or events through which the form of the city is reorganised in space. In greater metropolitan areas, the residual voids produced by the transformation of the city take on considerable dimensions and proportions. Like a cross-section, they reveal the profundity of history through their morphological depth; they expose the successive stratifications and fractures produced by transitions between various forms of city and society. Nevertheless, in the absence of a comprehensive political vision of the city, in recent years the destiny of such spaces has been pragmatically left to the urban market or, in other words, to their condition as vacant spaces waiting to be filled. But how should the otherness of these voids be considered from an architectural point of view? Should these spaces be considered in their singularityand uniqueness, simply as isolated opportunities to build exemplary

architectures?

A different reading can be suggested. I propose to observe derelict and residual areas from a distance: from a point where one can comprehend the critical mass they create within the fabric of the city. A distant viewpoint would easily reveal that a void is not always an exceptional space, but in many cases the dominant feature of the major metropolitan areas. The void generates a counter-image of the city, made from patterns of continuity and repetition which allow the creation of open spaces that interweave with the built environment, or new relationships between diverse fragments of the city's fabric. From this perspective, the relevance of the wasteland voids produced by urbanisation and their effect on the structure of the city are issues still to be explored.

What is at stake here is, once again, the cognitive function of architectural language,which can be seen as analogous to the narrative process, in the shape of a tool that brings intelligible form to reality. But given that the contemporary city has become an extended urbanised realm, this implies remapping and, if anything, enlarging the 'field of architecture', its materials, its categories and its aims: a narrative that shifts its focus from the building as an object and expressive unicum to an expanded field of relationships involving all of a region's natural and man-made components.

NOTES

1	In his essay 'L'architecture dans le boudoir', Manfredo Tafuri quotes this expression from Karl Kraus in order to criticise the flattening of architecture into a mere linguistic game. See: Manfredo Tafuri, *La sfera e il labirinto* (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), p. 335; Eng. tr.: *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

2	Vittorio Gregotti was the editor of Casabella from January 1982 to January 1996.

3	In recent years, the notion of *territorio*, elaborated in the French and Italian traditions of urban studies, has been the object of growing interest as it recalls a complex and wide set of interactions between the geographical substratum, human activities and cultures. Significant within this context is the seminal text by Vittorio Gregotti, namely 'La forma del territorio', originally published in *Edilizia Moderna* nº 87/88 – 1966 and only recently translated into English from the French revised version under the title 'The Form of the Territory', in: *OASE - Journal for Architecture*, nº 80, 'On Territories', December 2009.

4	I refer to Konrad Fiedler's assertions from the end of the nineteenth century. According to Fiedler, the link between reality and the language of art is first and foremost cognitive, and secondly, representational; therefore, following Fiedler's line of thought, art can be understood as a tool for gaining knowledge. See: Konrad Fiedler, *Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit* (Leipzig, 1887).

5	This topic has recently been discussed by Pier Vittorio Aureli in his analysis of the work of Aldo Rossi and Archizoom's No-Stop City. See: P.V. Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).

6	The issue of 'difference' and its relationship to 'repetition' was discussed by Gilles Deleuze in his book *Différence et répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968); Eng. tr.: *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

7	The issue of instability of form directly recalls the experience of the architecturalavant-garde of the 20th century; for example the ABC group.

8	I consider Umberto Eco to be among the most significant critical contributors to this argument, as in *La struttura assente* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968, Eng. tr. *The Absent Structure*), and in addition, Cesare Brandi, *Struttura e architettura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967, Eng. tr. *Structure and Architecture*). I refer also to the debate between Tomás Maldonado, Jacques Guillerme and the philosopher Enzo Melandri in *Casabella*, nº 560/1989 and nº 568-569/1990, and to K. Michael Hays 'Objects, Texts and Object-Texts: on the Recent Turn toward Textuality', *Casabella*, nº549/1988. More recent examples have been Mario Gandelsonas's reflections on architecture's rewriting of the city, in: *X-Urbanism: Architecture and the American City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

9	For an insight in the concept of 'composition' in architecture, see A. Colquhoun, 'Composition vs. the Project', in: *Casabella*, nº 520-21 Jan-Feb 1986, and, more recently: J. Lucan, *Composition, Non-composition. Architecture et théories XIX –*

XX siècles (Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques Romandes, 2009). See also: P. Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture* (1965) (McGill – Queens University Press, 1998).
10   Simone Pizzagalli, Spaces, Poetics and Voids