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STÉPHANE BONZANI, *DE L'INVENTION EN ARCHITECTURE: INITIER, SITUER, DURER*, ÉDITIONS DEUX-CENT-CINQ, PARIS, 2024.

This book explores invention in architecture in the Anthropocene, questioning architecture's relationship with philosophy and habitability. Stéphane Bonzani distinguishes invention from innovation, often conflated terms. While innovation refines and adapts, relying on prior knowledge for recognition and comparison, invention introduces something entirely new that is unpredictable and independent of existing frameworks, yet contributes to redefining existing conditions and connecting disparate realities.

Given today's social and environmental crises, the pursuit of novelty in architecture is increasingly seen as outdated. Originality is no longer a value in itself but must align with an ethical framework that critically examines progress. Architectural projects reveal complexities that transcend simplistic ideological interpretations. This is why the author critically interrogates the notion of invention in architecture and advocates for "inventing differently" in response to ecological crises that threaten the planet's habitability. Unlike modernism, which associated invention with rupture, *tabula rasa*, and radical newness, Bonzani proposes invention as *negotiation* rather than creative destruction, arguing that "inventing differently" should be linked to re-inhabiting the Earth in an inclusive and holistic manner. He draws inspiration from Kirkpatrick Sale's concept of Bioregionalism, Alexander Tzonis' and Liane Lefaivre's Critical Regionalism, and Alberto Magnaghi's advocacy for the Local Project.

The book is structured around three main themes: "Initiating," "Situating," and "Enduring," each concluding with "Challenges for Research" sections exploring theoretical implications for teaching and practice.

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INITIATING: RETHINKING BEGINNINGS

The first chapter, “Initiating,” invites us to reconsider invention as an act of beginning throughout architectural history. Bonzani questions founding myths, such as the “primitive hut,” as every architectural act emerges from a pre-existing context, whether it be a physical site, cultural traditions, or materials. The author examines the return to archaic architectural practices as a response to contemporary crises, referencing Bruno Zevi’s 1970s observation of a growing interest in prehistory and “architectless architectures.” This return to origins critiques technological society and ecological devastation. Zevi and other theorists argue that each era has sought to reset architecture in response to its unique challenges. Across cultures, foundation rites demonstrate that architecture is fundamental to establishing a habitable world, symbolizing the creation of a cosmos and imbuing space with meaning (as explored by Mircea Eliade). A successful beginning is crucial to the durability of the worlds it shapes, emphasizing the importance of inaugural acts. Architecture, Bonzani argues, serves as a matrix of beginnings, structuring societies and spaces. The contemporary architectural trend toward archaic gestures, simple forms, and raw materials—exemplified in the works of Peter Zumthor and Francis Kéré—reflects a deeper (re)connection with the world. This movement transcends fragile economic contexts, responding instead to the urgent need to rethink the conditions of existence and renew architectural practices in the face of ecological crises.

In the “Challenges for Research” section, Bonzani points out that the first major issue in the re-evaluation of architectural invention concerns initiation practices. Theoretically, this involves exploring how the foundational act of building—seen as an essential and archaic function—is being reconfigured today. Contemporary conditions seem to suppress the essential moment of beginning, what is not deliberate but results from several key trends, such as automation, which diminishes the architect’s role as an initiator. Preformatted architectural elements shift the architect’s role from creator to assembler, the author argues with a techno-critical approach, without considering that the prefabrication of wooden or adobe wall elements can contribute to the spread of ecological constructions and favour strong experiences of space and time. He is more concerned with the ontological difference of deterritorialised technical objects and architectural environment-objects, and further criticises “generalised programming” (Derrida), regulatory constraints,

risk-aversion and the culture of precaution, as they discourage architectural experimentation. The loss of ritual significance in acts of initiation reduces symbolic power, yet, “[t]he Anthropocene implies radical transformation and requires us to invent, even if it means reinventing invention itself.”¹

SITUATING: CONTEXT AND TIME

The second chapter, “Situating,” examines the fundamental distinction between architecture and technology, particularly the immobility and uniqueness of architectural objects. Unlike standard technical objects, architecture is anchored in a specific situation, which influences its mode of invention. The author explores the relationship between architectural objects and their environments, noting that while buildings are defined by their immobility, their surroundings are in constant flux, influencing the architecture itself. Therefore, buildings act as markers of time, allowing us to perceive changes in their contexts. Architectural transformations can be significant, as they sometimes alter entirely a structure’s identity. This dynamic interplay between stability and change is crucial for understanding architecture in an accelerating world.

In his attempt to grasp the relationship between architecture and place, Bonzani sets two dead-end positions against each other: one that sanctifies place (*genius loci*) versus one that weakens its force. In both cases, we miss the dynamic, interpretive relationship involved in architectural invention. In an era of homogenised architecture and standardised production, the tension between similarity and singularity becomes a central issue. Attention to the existing environment, temporality, and change is therefore essential for a thoughtful architectural approach. Invention in architecture, Bonzani asserts, requires lived knowledge—a deep engagement with the environment to prevent oversimplification and reductionism.

The relationship between architecture and context is also reconsidered. While context represents the existing environment, the project embodies the act of invention. The two are interdependent yet often treated separately. Given the pressures of productivism, architecture must redefine invention as an effort to establish conditions conducive to life.

¹ *L'Anthropocène implique une transformation radicale et engage à inventer, quitte à réinventer l'invention même.* S. Bonzani, *De l'invention en architecture*, p. 93.

In the “Challenges for Research” section, Bonzani calls for investigating how reevaluating localisation can reshape architecture. He questions how architecture, despite its immobility, can engage with localisation without rigidly confining sites within predefined identities or administrative boundaries. He then stresses theoretical concepts such as “paradox spatialities,” “milieu,” and “infra-place.” Traditional dichotomies like local versus global are outdated, as local contexts are inseparable from their dependencies. The notion of place must foster connections rather than isolation. Studying vernacular architecture offers resources for imagining complex arrangements between different realities. Bonzani distinguishes between *place*, which is often perceived as static, and *milieu*, which is dynamic and reflexive. The *infra-place* represents the underlying layers beyond immediate perception, crucial for addressing environmental challenges while preserving situational complexity.

ENDURING AND DURABILITY

The third chapter “Enduring” explores the durability of architecture, which often outlives the activities it houses. The question of longevity raises contemporary concerns, particularly the need to reduce the environmental footprint of architecture. Architecture should not be a simple response to needs and norms (shelter, efficiency...), but rather a field of possibilities. The author considers living as a “possibilising activity” and puts forward the idea that the duration of built environments gives rise to the possible over time: the longer a building lasts, the more possibilities appear in the uses we can make of it. Ensuring the longevity of built environments means extending architectural invention beyond initial construction, incorporating renovation and transformation. Durability reflects architecture’s foundational principle of maintaining connections over time. This perspective reframes architecture not just as the “art of building” but as the “art of connections”—a practice of maintaining and reinforcing ties.

Historically present in architectural theory since Vitruvius, this idea gains renewed importance today, as the crisis of habitability stems from the breakdown of physical, social, and ecological bonds. Architecture fosters multiple forms of connections, including physical, compositional, perceptual, social, political, symbolic, and emotional links, rooted in memory and attachment to places, that all contribute to interconnectivity. Though often considered separately, these connections interact

simultaneously in architecture. The current crisis of habitability stems from the breakdown of these relationships. Spaces do not become uninhabitable due to a lack of quality but because the ties that sustain them have been eroded. The author's thesis is that the durability of inhabited environments depends on careful attention to all these forms of attachment, reinforcing continuity and resilience in the built world.

In the "Challenges for Research" section, a key issue is to identify and map architectural practices that prioritise durability, moving beyond the 20th-century's obsession for novelty and innovation. In Europe, many architects are shifting towards an approach that values what lasts and are endeavouring to extend the lifespan of materials.

CONCLUSION: ECOLOGISING INVENTION

After exploring the triad "Initiating, Situating, Enduring," Bonzani concludes with the concept of "ecologising invention." He argues that while he rarely explicitly discusses ecology in his book, it is a fundamentally ecological book—understood as the interrelations between beings, ideas, and their environments. The book emphasises architecture's ecological role in shaping and being shaped by its context, rejecting abstract, universal ideas in favour of a situated, relational approach. As the three architectural key values are *initiation*, *immobility*, and *duration*, architecture must resist automation by emphasising the complexity of beginnings, challenge modern flux by embracing the fixed nature of buildings, and value long-term endurance over ephemeral trends. Ultimately, architecture should foster possibilities and resist the purely calculable or the overly abstract. Its mode of invention is paradoxically archaic, tied to origins while shaping the future. The book advocates for architecture as a practice of resistance, care, and creative engagement with its own conditions, grounding architectural theory in concepts that both interpret and stimulate inventive practice.

This book is not an easy read, as it is a very dense and theoretically rich, covering a wide range of topics, from history and philosophy in general to ethics and aesthetics, challenged by current environmental, social and cultural concerns. Whilst its complexity makes it sometimes hard to follow, its depth and scope offer valuable questions and insights into new aspects of architectural theory, as the author unsettles and re-examines concepts that may seem obvious at first glance. Of particular interest is the fact that time is considered as a key factor in the development of

invention in architecture, as it must incorporate durability as an essential factor of constant change. Ultimately, *De l'invention en architecture* is also a plea for good architecture, which must not content itself with merely conforming to environmental regulations, as it has a much more holistic and relational dimension that it needs to further explore.