

Maurizio Ferraris\*

## THE THROWN PROJECT: ARCHITECTURE AND WAR

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the concept of the project through a tragic but significant example, namely Albert Speer's project. Speer, like any architect worthy of the name, does not drop his designs from some hyperuranium of creativity, nor does he confine them to a drawing board for the benefit not of the inhabitants, but of the readers; and even more, unlike a machine, he does not merely execute the prescriptions of an algorithm. It is, on the contrary, rooted in a soil. By defending himself, by digging a hole of words, by invoking devices and programmes, by hiding behind a Diktat, Speer opens up a path that will be beaten after him, that, to express himself with Heidegger, of the "thrown project," of the fact that all our designing is nothing but the execution of a Message from the Emperor, the submission to the injunctions of technology. But the project, if it is a project, is lagging behind the programme, and conversely a programme that is not lagging behind (the laws of nature or trains when it goes well) is not a project. The project has a constitutive delay, it always has a delay, and that is why it is the delay, it does not have a delay.

**KEYWORDS:** philosophy of architecture, project, programme, delay, Albert Speer

---

\* Maurizio Ferraris: Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Turin; maurizio.ferraris@unito.it.

This is an Open Access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not transformed in any way and is properly cited.

Half a century ago, Venturi and Scott Brown urged architects, soon followed by philosophers, to learn from Las Vegas. In hindsight, and having experienced the limits of postmodernism, I wonder if it is not worth learning from Nuremberg and one of its secondary actors, Albert Speer. Not because all architects should behave like him (he was given 20 years in prison at Spandau, and it is not easy to determine whether it was too much or too little), but rather because in the human story of Speer's collaboration with Hitler, the whole of the project's distinctive traits are concentrated, as in a grotesque but expressive caricature. Architecture "and" the other from architecture can be seen particularly well in Speer, architect and politician as well as war criminal. This is why instead of starting in Las Vegas, like Venturi and Scott Brown, we will start in Nuremberg. In effect, the project's actors, i.e., the client, the architect, the work and the delay (the constitutive difference between the project conceived and the project realized) are exasperated by the circumstances: the client is a tyrant, the architect a demiurge, the work a failure in relation to the project, and the delay a mode of being that, present in every project, here manifests itself with a clarity that is unparalleled.

#### THE JUDGEMENT

Starting with a courthouse in a freshly bombed city after a terrible war instead of a hotel and casino complex in the desert is already a way of emphasizing the responsibility of the project from the outset. Speer, like any architect worthy of the name, does not drop his designs from some hyperuranium of creativity, nor does he confine them to a drawing board for the benefit not of the inhabitants, but of the readers; and even more, unlike a machine, he does not merely execute the prescriptions of an algorithm. It is, on the contrary, rooted in a soil, which is not necessarily the *Blut und Boden*, the soil from which and on which its design will be realized through the encounter with a reality full of unforeseen events, for every architect, but especially for an architect who found himself living Speer's life. To counteract the unforeseen, he has a pinch of inventiveness, but above all a huge inventory of invisible links, standards, documents, prefabricated forms with which he measures himself, physical limits and economic constraints. While designing, all this is, indeed, invisible or at least intangible, but the fruit of those elaborations is destined to endure even when the documents have burnt out, the original context has

disappeared, and the initial function has lost all meaning. So, learn from Nuremberg, in many senses.

Nuremberg is first and foremost the setting for the Neo-Greek architecture that Hitler's architect prepared for the Nazi rallies of the 1930s, and which is described by Heidegger in his essay on the Origin of the Work of Art, where the Greek temple is in fact a reproduction of the Pergamon altar created by Speer. And, above all, like the luminous columns that circumscribe space by heading upwards, to infinity, just as infinite was, in the expectations, the empire that was being built from Nuremberg onwards. The luminous columns were made famous, along with the disciplined marching columns and the waving of swastikas, by Leni von Riefensthal, and they have nothing to envy (and perhaps something to teach) the projects glorified by Venturi. Above all, they have much to teach in terms of sobriety to Filippo Panseca, Craxi's Speer, the author of a famous pyramid that stood out at the 1989 PSI congress. Creating in peacetime, with few material constraints, no bombing, no shortage of raw materials, is certainly an easy game to play.<sup>1</sup> But just comparing Speer's and Panseca's achievements, and even more so between Speer's and Panseca's principals, shows that it is precisely the lack of constraints, especially for ephemeral architecture and stage sets, that can allow the worst to emerge, a lack of inner restraint that is all the more evident in the absence of outer inhibitions.

However, the tribunal that judged Speer in Nuremberg in 1946 was not made up of *Casabella* editors, and condemned him not for the light games, nor for the New Chancellery, nor for the elegant armchairs that furnished Hitler's parlor in the bunker below, but for his actions as armaments minister. A political office like few others, but given, as it should be, to a technician, since it involves enormous planning actions, most significant in their effects. The situation, therefore, is not a foregone

---

<sup>1</sup> Although, as Alessandro Armando, whom I thank for the report, points out to me, Panseca also had his own thing to do: "I enjoyed making artistic things, I always tried to find symbols to remind people of the event. The '89 pyramid, in Italy, I would not have been able to make it, the regulations did not allow the import of more than a certain number of LEDs from Japan and by that year the level had been reached. So I asked Senator Formica, Minister of Industry at the time, to make a decree that allowed us to import the 50,000 LEDs needed to build it from Japan. And so we did, thanks to the work of a small artisan company in Oderzo." C. Dardana, "Filippo Panseca, l'artista di Craxi Dai progetti per le discoteche più in di Milano alla Piramide craxiana, storia dell'anima creativa dei socialisti che ha costruito un pezzo di Italia anni '80. Poi Tangentopoli ha spazzato via tutto," *Living Corriere*, 28 January 2020, <https://living.corriere.it/tendenze/extra/filippo-panseca-artista-bettino-craxi/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

conclusion. At Nuremberg, called upon to defend himself as a minister, Speer is judged for his designs, thus as an architect. They imprisoned him, which is rare but not impossible for an architect if his designs generate undesirable effects – collapsing bridges or the like. Here, however, the projects seem to have little to do with architecture. Are they projects in their own right? Of course they are. Even Operation Barbarossa is a project, of destruction and not construction, but still exposed to the unexpected and contingency. And on closer inspection, Speer's activity as armaments minister embodies the essence of architectural design more than any other project: designing a production line for tanks is much more historically decisive than building a villa in Berchtesgaden, even if the villa is still there, in excellent condition, and the tanks were blown to pieces in Kursk or Sandomierz, in Bastogne or Caen, on the Atlantic Wall or the Siegfried Line.

It will be observed that there are differences between the events judged at Nuremberg and those recounted by Armando and Durbiano. I will leave aside the most obvious ones and come to the decisive one: the Minister for Armaments is confronted with a project that is abstract in its aim, to support the military effort, and concrete in its means and procedures. Which after all seems to be the opposite of the design adventures, characterized by an extreme concreteness of ends and a very strong, if not abstraction, certainly indeterminacy of means. In both cases, however, in that of the Minister of Armaments and in that of the designer of Piazza Arbarello, the fundamental point remains that of a wager against contingency: in the promise of something that one does not have, and more precisely in the promise of a domination of circumstances and a government of destiny.

It is precisely the friction of the real that unites my architects with Hitler's minister. Not programs, paper prescriptions, those on which generations of architects<sup>2</sup> have been fed, similar indeed to the military plans of Benningsten, Barclay de Tolly and Schwarzenberg (*“die Erste Kolonne marschirt, die Zweite Kolonne marschirt...”*) regularly reduced to waste paper by Napoleon. As Helmuth von Moltke, the strategist of the Prussian triumph of 1870, wrote, “Only the uninitiated glimpse in the unfolding of a campaign the consistent execution of an original idea,

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. Durbiano, *I nuovi maestri: architetti tra politica e cultura nel dopoguerra*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2000, on paper architectures, on the architectures that fascinated a group of architects who never became architects, just as Agnelli never became lawyer, and Dick Diver stopped being a psychiatrist very early on.

previously worked out in all its details by the commander and to which he remained faithful to the end.” It was this principle that guided Speer in delaying the catastrophe, with a strategy even more impeccable than Kesselring’s on the Italian front, and it was this that he had to account for in the Allied tribunal.

Before the tribunal, Speer adopted a particularly intelligent political line. Unlike the majority of the Nazi establishment, he pleaded guilty to the crimes he was accused of. This obviously predisposed his judges favorably. But the masterstroke took place with the final declaration made on 31 August 1946, in which the fundamental responsibility for the incident was ascribed to the complexity and effectiveness of the German technical apparatus,<sup>3</sup> downgrading the project to a program. *Cherchez la femme*: the technician blames the technique. Speer’s discourse opened up the broad perspectives of the non-responsibility of technicians that still prevails in common sense today (think of the absolution and impoliticity that the syntagm ‘technical government’ presupposes) and at the same time made it possible to realize a kind of Metropolis-like dystopia, according to which humans, in the “age of technology” (a strange expression, given that technology has accompanied and defined humanity since its origins) would be reduced to automatons, and moreover enslaved by the machines they themselves had produced.

“With the help of technical means, such as the radio and the loudspeaker, the will of one man was able to dominate eighty million men.” That is, Hitler’s will. Speer’s self-absolution, his wanting to place all the blame on the technique (the program) and from there on the Leader (the one and only person in total charge of the project), is really weak.

---

<sup>3</sup> “Hitler’s was the first dictatorship of an industrialised state in the modern ‘technical age.’ A dictatorship that made complete and perfect use of technical means to dominate its people. With the help of technical means, such as the radio and the loudspeaker, the will of one man was able to dominate eighty million men. The telephone, the telegraph, the radio allowed the orders of the supreme authority to reach directly to the farthest branches of power where, because of their high origin, they were executed without the slightest objection. It was by this route that the civil directorates and military commands received their sinister orders directly. The technical means permitted the capillary control of the citizens and at the same time allowed criminal acts to be carried out in the utmost secrecy. This state apparatus looked, seen from the outside, like the tangle, apparently devoid of system and order, of the cables of a telephone exchange. But it too, like the latter, could be moved and dominated by a single will. The dictatorships of the past needed, at all ranks, even the lowest, quality collaborators, men capable of thinking and acting for themselves. The authoritarian system, in the age of technology, can afford to do without the lower management cadres: it replaces them, mechanising them, with the modern means of civilisation. Hence the pure ‘executor of orders’ is born, who does not use criticism.”

The more sophisticated a technique is, the greater the autonomy it grants to the human being, and thus the responsibility it places on him, in the first person, without shielding himself behind a Chief, a technocratic autocrat, as Speer does, or behind the omnipotence of technique. Because technology cannot be at fault, it is not daggers, cars or tanks that are on trial, but the humans who, in various capacities, were behind them, who had designed them, even if then, in the age of automation, a program was all that was needed to realize them. The program is innocent, because it cannot be guilty; the design, on the other hand, always carries a responsibility and an intention, however great the constraints and obstacles it may come up against.

### THE LAIR

Disguised as an executor of programs, like generals fleeing disguised as soldiers or civilians, Speer could not deny the evidence, the fact that he was a designer, that he had engineered everything he did and had it done. Succeeding an engineer, Fritz Todt, he was the superior of another engineer, Franz Xaver Dorsch, the designer of the Atlantic Wall, a reinforced concrete Chinese wall that after the war experienced a second life as a destination for architecture enthusiasts. In other words, an immense enclosure on a territory that, over time, was strewn with dens. And one wonders how many orders, how many regulations and norms, how many problems and solutions lay behind the pyramids of the Wolf's Lair lost in a Polish forest just like the Mayan pyramids overrun by forest in Chichén Itzá or like the barracks of Chernobyl. It is pure design. And if we were to bring Speer's project together under one name, it would be: the lair. Speer did nothing but produce dens, large or small, for the Cape, solid walls to defend it when things took a turn for the worst (in 1935 the walls were beams of light, in 1945 they are five meters of reinforced concrete), and suitable weapons to keep enemies as far away from those walls as possible.

The object lasts longer than the project and indicates both its success and failure. In those rooms, until 30 April 1945, the great commissioner was locked up. There was no air, there was the constant hum of the malfunctioning ventilation system, the blows and jolts of the Russian artillery that had taken the place of the Allied air raids for a few days, and there was the portrait of Frederick the Great. This time the grand coalition had prevailed, and there would be no Sanssouci to survive the grand

design. Thus ends the chapter of Speer as interior architect, designer of furniture for the Chancellery today for sale among enthusiasts. As well as of cutlery sets with swastikas. A total design, a design *Gesamtkunstwerk* that stems from the fact that Speer, unlike, for example, Piacentini, was not the architect of a state, but of a person and his environment.

As a builder of dens, here Speer had responded to the needs not only of the tyrant, but also of the tyrant's fiancée and wife *in extremis*, Eva Braun. The fact that Hitler did not have a harem definitely simplified Speer's interlocations, not least because Eva, a lover of jazz and sentimental songs was probably much more in tune with the fundamental Stimmung of the elegant Heidelberg architect. "Blood-Red Roses Tell Me about You" was a song of the time that both Eva and Albert liked very much. For Eva, Albert, revealing his versatility, designed the sofa on which the newlyweds lay motionless after their suicide, speaking of blood-red roses.

The Bunker's minor projects are not necessarily atypical (there are plenty of architects who have also tried their hand at furniture and design) and are a counterpoint to the major projects which, conversely, of all the architects in history only Speer had the privilege of: the material organization of the German military effort. They were, I repeat, projects in their own right, and certainly no one could claim that, as the projects of an architect, they are above criticism (this, of course, also applies to all those architects, and they are the majority, who did not plan the German wartime armaments industry). On the contrary, they were the essence of design as an organization of space and time, that of which architectural design is but one manifestation, privileged perhaps because of its particular concrete recognizability. How much to say that the Atlantic Wall, the hangars, the harbors, the dry docks that are still visible today, are but the vestiges of the Absolute Lair; of the project for the defense of Fortress Europe that would lose the race to the Operation Overlord project, of which we are left with more tenuous and posthumous traces, such as the cemeteries near the Norman coast and the monuments that here and there evoke the combat.

Walls, casemates, anti-tank ditches. This sounds like engineer's rather than architect's stuff, but once you get into the overall horizon of the lair, the project becomes clearer. The client needs dens, and the architect designs them. This is classically the case with the Wolf's Lair in Rastenburg, in what was then East Prussia and is now Poland, the headquarters of Hitler's military command from the start of Operation Barbarossa until the

winter of 1944, when Hitler abandoned it to move west to another lair, the Eagle's Nest in Bad Nauheim from which he directed the Ardennes Offensive, before entrenching himself in the Chancellery Bunker that was to be his last landfall, his last lair and his temporary grave. The Eagle's Nest, used for less than a month, appeared to Hitler too elegant for its military purpose. No trace remains of the Bunker, all we know is that it was located under today's Hannah-Arendt-Straße, a stone's throw from the Holocaust Memorial designed by Peter Eisenman with the same basic material as the bunkers and dens built by Todt, concrete.

The exemplary den therefore remains the Wolf's Den, which was created in the euphoric times of the advance as a temporary residence before Moscow – for some time between 1942 and 1943 Hitler left it to move to a more advanced location in the Ukraine, in Vinnycja, christened 'Werwolf'. The Rastenburg lair was initially made up of wooden barracks, but the stagnation of the war, the risk of Soviet (and indeed German) *coups d'état* on 20 July 1944 and Hitler's paranoia imposed pharaonic work on Speer's organization. The Soviets, who occupied it on 27 January 1945, the same day as the liberation of Auschwitz, stunned as they walked through the complex that the retreating Germans had unsuccessfully tried to demolish with tons of explosives. Those ruins, immense pyramids for a pharaoh who died elsewhere, are still visible today, a sign of the survival of a truly cast project, built for practical purposes and with materials that ensured its immortality far more and far better than the simple models of Linz.

This survival may open up the question of recovery, i.e., the birth of a new project on the rubble of the old. This case is anything but infrequent, and thus opens up a new page of planning, whether it be the spontaneous planning that turns the Colosseum into a popular apartment block, or the amphitheaters of Lucca, Arles and Pollenzo as a form of the city that closes in on itself by contracting demographically, or the initially awkward planning (what are we going to do with it?) then increasingly free and flowing in the recovery of the military vestiges of the Third Reich. If Castel Sant'Angelo is the case of a tomb that becomes a fortress, we can give the case of a fortress that is transformed not into a tomb, but certainly into a mausoleum, into architectural evidence that goes far beyond the original intentions of the project.

This is, typically, the story of the Flakturm, dens to the nth power, made to protect like shelters and to attack like artillery positions. A unique artefact in the history of architecture, the flak towers that in

Berlin, Vienna and Hamburg the Todt organization built, to designs by Friedrich Tamms, Speer's collaborator, from 1942 onwards, made up for the Luftwaffe's inferiority of means, they housed field hospitals and thousands of Berliners (in Vienna and Hamburg they did not play such a central role) and, because of the skill with which they were built, they left it to posterity, who only very rarely managed to blow up those concrete mountains, to do something with them. Hence the multiple reuses, which in some cases have the air of a casual survival, perhaps in a context that combines the eternal of the tower with the ephemeral of Las Vegas; or with an eternal that is better integrated into the environment, and restored to its dimension of luxury, calm and bourgeois voluptuousness as in the penthouse on one of the two Berlin towers; or with the opening up of a design that, in the style of the vertical forest, transforms the tower that between 1942 and 1945 housed up to 25,000 people under bombardment into a 136-room hotel of the NH chain, as well as a concert hall.

#### THE CLIENT

But let us not digress. By defending himself, by digging a hole of words, by invoking devices and programs, by hiding behind a Diktat, Speer opens up a path that will be beaten after him, that, to express himself with Heidegger, of the "thrown project," of the fact that all our designing is nothing but the execution of a Message from the Emperor, the submission to the injunctions of technology. But if it is understandable as a line of defense, that of the thrown project (plainly put: dictated) is not an acceptable motivation, especially outside a court of law. And, if the project is not dictated, it is a real project, the anticipation of an idea destined to change as much as one likes in its making, but which is nevertheless someone's idea and not the prescription of a cynical and baroque fate. Responsible in every way as a designer, he shared responsibility, one hundred per cent, like a burden that is not divided but multiplied, with the client, who, in ancient times, was remembered in place of the architect. It is the client who needs the project, it is he who indicates its purpose, it is he who allows its feasibility, at least until the Russians, in our case, enter his palace and force him to commit suicide in the Bunker. Until a moment before, however, the client's planning is still alive, and mobilizes the architects no less than the generals. Just like my reference architects, Speer had to work closely with a client – and what a client: a

genocide, a dreamer, an Austrian petit-bourgeois, a megalomaniac, and above all a manic depressive.

The thousand-year Reich only lasted 12 years, yet the game of infinity has not yet ended. The project, which in this case is not Speer's but Hermann Giesler's, goes beyond death, beyond bombs, beyond defeat. It remains, however, a pure project, a failed project, a model that was lost along with so many furnishings in May 1945. We know that in those months Hitler went through moments of depression and moments of euphoria, and we do not know whether the contemplation of that model was tinged with regret for a world that was collapsing or with hope for the new world. Indeed, in the early days Hitler found the bombings providential, as they would pave the way for a complete reconstruction of the Reich; which in fact took place, of necessity, but without any planning. In order to find planning again on German soil, we will have to wait half a century, to make up not for the devastation of the Lancasters and the B29, but for that of the bulldozers that, by removing the Berlin Wall, had left a large empty strip in the heart of the city.

This is where the theme of the Almighty Principal opens up. There have been certain moments when design has enjoyed a freedom inconceivable in any democratic regime and has seemed subject only to the law of gravity: in Speer as in Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles, in Oddone of Metz as in Michelangelo and Bernini, in Vauban as in Juvarra. The two designers, the tyrannical client and the demiurgic architect, know that they can do whatever they want, and it is from this omnipotence that they envisage gigantic statues of Charlemagne in Paris looking towards Aachen, and from there to Berlin, the new capital of Europe. These are projects that seem to remind us by amplifying Haussmann and prelude to the great axis of Niemeyer's Brasilia, but which, in our pride of modernity, we are perhaps unable to see as reminiscent of Constantine's plans for the new capital of the Roman Empire. Not to mention the fact that, unlike the cosmopolis planned by Hitler and Speer, Constantinople was indeed the base of an empire that lasted not twelve years, but twelve centuries, mainly thanks to the walls built by Theodosius II that made it impregnable until the advent of artillery.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> As Alessandro Armando suggests, "Perhaps the walls, being persistent and difficult to demolish (like the Wolf's Lair) were not a mere design but realised architecture? In short, these examples reinforce more and more the distinction between the project as a mere design of a vision that remains on paper and the project as a laborious ferry towards a material

Returning to our patron and our architect, surely the generals throughout the war, and increasingly so as the conflict progressed, saw their planning and professionalism systematically hampered by the interference of the man who was ironically and resignedly referred to as *Größter FaZ*, *Größter Feldherr aller Zeiten* (“the greatest leader of all time”). Did the architect remain free? Or did he follow the generals’ fate since he was also a minister? Certainly, by slowing down the production of necessary fighters in favor of bombers that were now useless if the war had gone on the defensive, the commissioner interfered heavily in the designer’s decisions. On the other hand, it was the times, and not the customer, that dictated the requirements.

Design freedom opens up two problems, one of an aesthetic nature, the other of an ethical nature. From an aesthetic point of view, Haussmann and Napoleon III, as well as Speer and Hitler, define a privileged relationship between architecture and power, which as such is rare and perhaps undesirable. The condition of Mira Petrescu, winner in 1981, at only thirty-two years of age, of the competition that, starting in 1984, would lead her to build, under the guidance of seven hundred architects and twenty thousand workers, the Casa Poporului, the third largest building in the world and the heaviest by far. Consider that the competition for that building took place ten years after the one for the Centre Georges Pompidou, but the result of which, unlike that of 34-year-old Renzo Piano, goes back decades.

As for the ethical problem, as we saw at the beginning, Speer did his utmost to downgrade to a program, i.e., to the mere execution of orders, a project that he had certainly shared with a client, but which did not cease to be a project, on the contrary. An attitude that is understandable, of course, but which forgets a fundamental element, namely that the client’s aims were implemented thanks to the architect’s means. The latter, having reached the last act, by dismissing the client and blaming the technique reveals himself to be a great designer, in the sense that he sells a captivating and exonerating narrative, but he does it, it really has to be said, *pro domo sua*. Before that deft but disingenuous move, Speer had made others in the last months of the war. One is most likely a retrospective invention, an attempt to make the patron die in the den he had built for himself by throwing gas down the ventilation chimney.

---

realisation, which when completed is practically irreversible. Between the delirium of omnipotence and implementation.”

The unpredictability of the project here had manifested itself in the fact that someone else had noticed how vulnerable the chimney was, and had raised it several meters, preventing the architect's industrious repentance.

But apart from the failed murder of the client, which, if successful, would perhaps have fulfilled the secret aspirations of many architects even in peacetime, and avenged all the architects in history who were murdered by clients to keep the building secret, it remains that Speer represents the, to say the least, singular case of an architect who, when things take a turn for the worse, dismisses the client, resigns his mandate like a lawyer in the face of an indefensible lawsuit, resigns his political robes and resumes those of the impolitic.

### THE DELAY

It was too late when, in the months of a meltdown suspended between Wagner and Céline, Speer had been faced with a serious case of conscience, that of planning the destruction of the entire German infrastructure and industrial apparatus in order to make scorched earth ahead of the Russian advance. This was what the Nero Order issued by Hitler on 20 March 1945 prescribed. As we know, Speer, in agreement with the upper echelons of German industry, did not carry out the order and even tells us of the daring landing in Berlin on 26 April 1945 for a final farewell from his great patron to whom he confessed that he had disobeyed. Now, if he was able to disobey, it was because he had previously chosen to obey, manifesting that discretion which is the mark of the designer. And when he disobeyed, I repeat, it was too late, and too little.

Speer, in fact, is not only the one who did not follow Nero's order, he is the one who, against all odds, claimed to have known nothing about the extermination. But who was to all intents and purposes part of a project within which the extermination and war of aggression was also included, as well as the use of forced labor. It was he who arranged a production system of unprecedented efficiency, who kept open the virtually impossible and factually surreal dialogue between the dictator now out of his depth and German big business. It was he who held negotiations no less difficult and surreal as those with Goebbels and Himmler, who wanted to turn his army of workers into an army of *Volksturm* or SS. The armaments minister worked miracles and allowed the war to last beyond all human planning. And he did this precisely through planning that did not take place in a desert full of possibilities and free of obstacles, but

under the weight of bombing, of military defeat, and, what is perhaps even worse, in a fight to the death with the rest of the Nazi leadership, in a fight that he had not experienced in the good old days when he was simply an architect and only had to contend with the client.

A decorator of dens as large as the New Chancellery or as small as the Bunker below, Speer failed, therefore he designed: like Beckett, he tried, he failed, and history gave him no opportunity to fail again and to fail better. If his actions, as he explained at Nuremberg, had been dictated by a device, there would have been stumbles or catastrophes, but not failures. Because an algorithm, as such, is infallible, and it is precisely this infallibility that creates the greatest problems for those who have to deal with it, i.e., all of us (try to make a computer understand in simple terms that it should not produce “I’m coming!” every time we type the S, and not to capitalize after every exclamation, and you will see what I mean).

But what is the failure? The lost war? The ugly house? If this were the case, there would be no wars won (which, let’s face it, are exactly equal in number to the wars lost) and no beautiful houses, which there are, and still are, being built, contrary to the convictions of Charles of England and Houellebecq,<sup>5</sup> who evidently believe that if old houses seem more pacified, it is because the patrons are dead, and at most express their dissatisfaction by wandering around like ghosts. Here we are confronted with a mystery I do not know how painful or joyous, for which one has never seen anyone complain about the works exhibited in a gallery, while anyone, even the most external and indifferent observer, always has something to complain about a project, its execution, and above all its result.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the fact that the project ideally includes the cli-

---

<sup>5</sup> M. Houellebecq, *Anéantir*, Flammarion, Paris, 2022, pp. 93ff, describing a walk in Lyon: “On the opposite hillside stretched wooded hills interspersed with groups of old buildings, which must have dated back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was all very harmonious, and above all extraordinarily relaxing. Unfortunately, one couldn’t help but notice that a pleasant landscape, nowadays, was almost necessarily one that had been preserved for at least a century from any kind of human intervention.”

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Dossi’s analysis in *I mattoidi, al primo concorso pel monumento in Roma a Vittorio Emanuele II* (1884) is a catalogue of irritations and impatience with all kinds of projects, which declares in its incipit the cruciality of failure: “Here I am, you poor little sketches that have fled or are on their way to the asylum, before which those who take life on the tragic pass by making acts of indignation and those who take it, as it should be, at play, indulge in moments of resounding hilarity. Once the competition is over, the honours, if not of marble, of bank paper are attributed to a project that is an insult to contemporary art and a parody of ancient art, and the impotence of the happenstance and intriguing mediocrity are mentioned with official praise. But I come to you, you little monsters of the imagination, I come to gather you into the coffers of my spirit, to place you in the pathological muzzle of

ent (as an eponymous hero, as an inspirer, or even just as an inhabitant) explains the awkwardness that architects sometimes encounter in designing for themselves (Eisenman's house has nothing Eisenmanian about it) or, conversely, the hyperbole of the unappeasable client who exhausts the architect, for example by making Malaparte's "House like me"<sup>7</sup>.

There are two ways to justify failure. The first is to see in the client the general, i.e., the one who indicates the ultimate goal of the strategy, and in the architect the colonel, i.e., the one who puts into practice the goals expressed by the general. Now, although this narrative may please both generals and colonels, I suspect, in which I am also comforted by my reference architects, that things are very different. There is no doubt that in manifesting the purpose, the client possesses only a vague idea, and thus wields imaginary power. For his part, the architect presents himself as the executor capable of giving reality to the idea. Both representations are mythological, but they define a play of parts. Just to understand, if things go well, it is very easy to conceive of a client who, when things are done, sees in the realized work the faithful execution of ideas he never had. And it is just as easy to think that if things go wrong, the client blames the architect.

But in Nuremberg the Chief was not there, he had been dead for more than a year. It was really too late to remedy the situation, to call

---

my writings. First of all, you deserve it. You are not at all, as they say, unworthy of consideration. At the very least, your fathers show with you a much grayer wit than the authors of those projects that belong to the bureaucracy of art. What are these in fact? They are projects of things that already exist, daring that do not go beyond 'the lurid' combinations of rhyme and recipe, thefts with the aggravating circumstance of having spoiled the stolen stuff to dissimulate its origin. You, on the other hand, have in common with the authors of genius the eagerness for research and the ambition for the new, qualities that frighten even the ignorant crowd and the adventurous plebs from beauty. You fell, it is true, in the attempt - which did not come to your aid with sufficient wings of mind - but, at least, it was your purpose to fly to the stars, not to jump a fence. Nor is the study of you superfluous. One arrives at that artistic perfection which is claimed by all and attained by few, a perfection which eludes all axiomatic precepts, as much by meditating on beautiful deeds as by examining those which are the opposite. Nothing can be learnt from mediocrity alone. Conconi, Otto, Amèndola, Ximènes and a few others, with their magnificently conceived and executed projects, give us an idea of sanity in art. Here, on the other hand, illness is analysed, an equally important study." C. Dossi, *I mattoidi, al primo concorso pel monumento in Roma a Vittorio Emanuele II*, A. Sommaruga e C., Roma, 1884.

<sup>7</sup> One would not say the same of the other famous "house like me" that fills the philosophical imagination of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Heidegger's hut or cabin in Todtnauberg, without forgetting, however, that it was in fact a prefabricated one, something similar to the tiny houses of which YouTube clips are buzzing. Truly a house like that, a handmade house even if (and there is nothing surprising about this, it is the characteristic of all tiny houses) it is in fact prefabricated, i.e., pre-planned, prescribed, pre-fabricated.

himself out. The marvellous weapons that were supposed to defend him and the Chief arrived too late, and the only short-term result of the V2 missiles was to persuade the Allies to continue bombing raids that were at that point only massacres of civilians, and in the long term to anticipate the conquest of space by offering Hergé creative material in the meantime. Of course, it was not he who had invented them, nor had he designed the futuristic jet planes that took to the skies when the fuel had run out. Having arrived late, after the death of Fritz Todt, his predecessor, on 8 February 1942, a few months before El Alamein and Stalingrad, in all his efficiency, Speer had done nothing but accumulate delays in relation to an increasingly less predictable, increasingly cumbersome, increasingly rapid reality, precisely because it was real and not imaginary. It was no longer enough to execute plans, as his predecessor had done in the days of fat cows and blitzkrieg, it was a matter of planning in the face of an unpredictable contingency, and in the face of the unexpected and the sudden, a plan is of no use, you need a plan, but when it arrives, it will always be late.

This is what Speer was guilty of, like every architect: delay, which in this case was very bad luck for him and very good luck for mankind. You can make wonderful, horrendous or even criminal plans, but if there is a project behind, there is always a delay; if there is no delay, there is no project, but program, mechanical execution of a plan. The hospital built in a week in China, the Liberty-class ships built by the dozens by the Americans during the war, had no plan behind them, no time, but only a program, drawn up as a copy of a prototype. And after the fall, in Spandau prison, Speer was left with nothing but programs, writing memoirs and cultivating the garden. These were precisely programs, against which he could never have fallen behind.

But the project, if it is a project, is lagging behind the program, and conversely a program that is not lagging behind (the laws of nature or trains when it goes well) is not a project. The project has a constitutive delay, it always has a delay, and that is why it is the delay, it does not have a delay<sup>8</sup>. This is what my two reference architects suggest and I think

---

<sup>8</sup> E. Albinati, *La scuola cattolica*, Rizzoli, Milano 2016: "Goals are made on purpose not to be achieved; it is the unique nature of the centre not to be centred. Whether the forces diminish along the way, whether the goal moves imperceptibly forward, whether the initial plans were too optimistic or presumptuous or abstract, or the obstacles higher than expected [...] I don't know what the name of his science is or what it is based on, but a certain scholar has calculated that whatever project is put into the pipeline will on average cost a third

I understand what they mean. On paper you study optimal solutions, but in reality you negotiate with sub-optimal solutions, sometimes it goes well, sometimes not. I am writing these lines in my office at the Luigi Einaudi Campus in Turin, designed by Norman Foster's studio and very beautiful to look at. The view from the studio is also beautiful, but I am dying of heat in January, this is because in the execution, the insulating glass envisaged by the architect was not installed, but rather completely ordinary glass. As a result, the architect did not sign the project, I am contemplating buying a penguin, increasing precisely that ecological damage that was intended to be prevented with the insulating glass, and somewhere in Turin there is a happy glazier. I am careful not to complain since I spent the rest of my academic life, as a student and as a teacher, in Palazzo Nuovo, designed by Gino Levi-Montalcini (the Gino of Ginzburg's *Lessico familiare*), built between 1961 and 1966, inaugurated in 1968 and since then (sixty years since work began) in reconstruction and deconstruction, an absolute record that for me as for others has been a cause of sadness and discomfort, but which indicates well what distinguishes the impeccability of a program from the fallibility (and therefore also perfectibility) of a project.

About ten years ago, before I got to know my reference architects and began to learn from Turin, as well as Las Vegas and Nuremberg, I would have simply said that Palazzo Nuovo sucked.<sup>9</sup> It was a superficial position and a hasty judgement, that of Charles of England and Houellebecq. Today this is no longer the case, the resignation of old age has something to do with it, and the hope that things will not end too soon, but certainly in these ten years, in dialogue with Alessandro and Giovanni, I feel I have learnt the essence of the project, which is precisely a mixture of failure, hiccup, and last but not least, delay. There is always something wrong, there is always someone complaining, there is always a snag or a hindrance. This must be why the architect's conscience is often, by destiny or vocation, an unhappy conscience. And the only one to fully enjoy the secret of the project, its essence, is the umarell in front of the construction site, a pensioner who contemplates the project of others with the nostalgia and suffering reserved for a phantom limb.

---

more than the initial budget and take a third longer than the planned time to realise. And this seems an inescapable fact. Only rare exceptions escape the law of constitutive delay."

<sup>9</sup> And I wrote it in M. Ferraris, "Palazzo nuovo e altre folies," P. D'Angelo *et al.* (eds.), *Costellazioni estetiche: dalla storia alla neoestetica. Studi in onore di Luigi Russo*, Guerini, Milano, 2013, pp. 157–164.

### SIXTH PIECE: THE THROWN PROJECT

Seen from the other side, the example is a project, that is, the will projecting itself forward to make objects or events possible. This projecting forward is teleology in its purest state, since we turn not towards the world of what is or has been, but of what, in the light of our project, should be there.

On the one hand, therefore, there is a banal observation to be made, namely that in its projection into the future, the project is pure possibility, which may be realized very differently from what was thought or not at all. Indeed, if there is anything certain we can say about the project, it is that its realization – be it a house, a battle or a novel – will be different from the form it took in its first conception.

Hence a perhaps somewhat less obvious observation, namely that the project is at least as much in the world as in the head of its conceiver, if not more. As a result, in the project, teleology does not fly freely – as it does in the imagination – but is conditioned by what is there, i.e., by ontology, by the situation in the field; by what we know at the moment we design, i.e., by epistemology; and by the happy or unhappy way we act, i.e., by technology.

The most surprising result of the project, then, is that its technological projection translates into an archaeological revelation: that which is in front of us, and which is the fruit of a tension towards the future, carries with it all its own past, i.e., not only the stages of its own manufacture, but also the reminiscences and examples that triggered the genetic act of the project.

### SEVENTH PIECE: THE END AND THE END

Turning from projects to proverbs, we recall the saying that when the house is finished, all that remains is to wait for death. In a melancholic or sinister way, this sentence reminds us of the essential link between having ends, i.e., purposes in life, and having an end, i.e., being part of an organic process, life, precisely, whose ultimate end is death.

This characteristic, that is, the fact of being an organism that as such is subject to irreversible processes, is what unites us with any non-human animal. However, because – as humans – we are organisms systematically connected to mechanisms, the constitutive circle of human nature is created.

As organisms, we only possess internal purposes, and we only go in one direction, death. But as human organisms, we are connected with mechanisms that possess external purposes (the knife is made to cut, the book is made to be read, the constitution is made to regulate a state, etc.), which retroact on our first nature, the organic nature, and determine our second nature. The latter, therefore, overflows with external purposes that come to us from the techno-social world we enter when, immediately after birth, we begin to receive an education.

On the one hand, then, as organisms, we feel the pressure of metabolism, and precisely for this reason we develop an intentionality, a temporality, a value system whose first origin lies in organic need and its absolute character: there is no remedy for death, and therefore it is a matter of submitting to the impositions of that struggle against death which is precisely metabolism. And it is here that the essential link is constructed with the end that constitutes us as organisms.

On the other hand, however, as human organisms, we feel the pressure not only of the primary need, but also of the great technological apparatus of external ends that we call “culture” or, indeed, “second nature,” and it is those external ends that, as I have said, retroacting on the internal end, modify and structure it, constellating the road that leads to the end with a great number of external ends, objectives, aspirations and ideals. (Which is why, returning to the proverb with which I began this piece, every achievement of an end carries within itself, more or less covertly, the air of the end).

## REFERENCES

- Albinati, Edoardo (2016), *La scuola cattolica*, Milano: Rizzoli.
- Dardana, Cecilia (2020), “Filippo Panseca, l’artista di Craxi Dai progetti per le discoteche più in di Milano alla Piramide craxiana, storia dell’anima creativa dei socialisti che ha costruito un pezzo di Italia anni ‘80. Poi Tangentopoli ha spazzato via tutto,” *Living Corriere*, 28 January, <https://living.corriere.it/tendenze/extra/filippo-panseca-artista-bettino-craxi/> (accessed 15 July 2022).
- Dossi, Carlo (1884), *I mattoidi, al primo concorso pel monumento in Roma a Vittorio Emanuele II*, Roma: A. Sommaruga e C.
- Durbiano, Giovanni (2000), *I nuovi maestri: architetti tra politica e cultura nel dopoguerra*, Venezia: Marsilio.
- Ferraris, Maurizio (2013), “Palazzo nuovo e altre folies,” in Paolo D’Angelo *et al.* (eds.), *Costellazioni estetiche: dalla storia alla neoestetica. Studi in onore di Luigi Russo*, Milano: Guerini, pp. 157–164.
- Houellebecq, Michel (2022), *Anéantir*, Paris: Flammarion.