



*Weak architecture* evokes, from the outset, an allusion (not difficult to apprehend) to the terms *weak thought* and *weak ontology* that Gianni Vattimo and subsequently other Italian, as well as French and German, thinkers have put into circulation in recent years. It seems to me that what really lies behind *four Weak Architecture* the propositions of weak philosophy is an interpretation of our contemporary culture's international, aesthetic situation. It is this subtext that leads to the question: What role is accorded to architecture in the aesthetic system of contemporary weak thought?

In a recent essay on the question of realism in modern architecture, Manfredo Tafuri posed the problem of interpreting what we commonly refer to as modern architecture, concluding that the contemporary experience, embracing all of twentieth-century architecture, can no longer be read in any linear form. On the contrary, it presents itself to us as a plural, multiform, complex experience in which it is legitimate to cut sectional trajectories that run not only from top to

diversified, juxtaposed time that constitutes one of the basic conditions of modernity. It is nevertheless clear that this condition was not always fully understood by the masters of modern architecture, who in many cases thought that what was needed was a time divorced from the centralism of perspectival vision, but which might perfectly well be a time organized from the linear viewpoint, after the fashion of the cinematographic sequence. In Le Corbusier, the *promenade architecturale* is not a diversity but an itinerary that admits the possibility of control. This is the illusory hope that we find not only in Le Corbusier but equally in Giedion and in other foundational architectures and histories of the modern experience. What is abundantly clear is that, increasingly, metropolitan culture offers us times as diversity, and the recognition of this is something that an archaeological approach to the languages of architecture has manifested in a number of ways.

This diversity of times becomes absolutely central in what I have chosen to call weak architecture. In sympathy with the visions of Joyce and others, and in contrast to the idealist narrative sustained by Giedion, these architectures transform the aesthetic experience of the artwork, and specifically of architecture, into *event*. Temporality does not present itself as a system but as an aleatory instant that, responding above all to chance, is produced in an unforeseeable place and moment. In certain works of contemporary art, in dance, in music, in installation, the experience of the temporal as event, occurring once and then gone forever, ably explicates a notion of temporality that finds in the event its fullest form of expression.

If the notion of event allows us to approximate more closely one of the characteristics of weak architecture, the Deleuzian notion of the *pli*, or fold, is no less definitive. Gilles Deleuze published a book that, under the apparently

innocuous guise of a summary of Foucault's thought, set out to develop a whole project constitutive of a contemporary vision of reality. The seductive appeal of this text lies, among other things, in its grasp of the fact that in contemporary thought the objective and the subjective are not different and opposing fields but constitute what he calls "folds of a single reality." For architecture, this notion of the fold proves exceptionally illuminating. Reality emerges as a continuum in which the time of the subject and the time of external objects go round together on the same looped tape, with the encounter of objective and subjective only occurring when this continuous reality folds over in a disruption of its own continuity.

Eugenio Trias, in his book *Los límites del mundo*, speaks of the untimely nature of the contemporary situation and contemporary art; untimely in the sense of sudden, unanticipated coagulations of reality, events that are produced not through linear and foreseeable organization but through folds and fissures, as Foucault himself sometimes says, that in some way afford the refuge, the tremulous fluttering of a brief moment of poetic and creative intensity.

Together with the precarious nature of the event and this untimely fold of reality, what I have called weak architecture is always decorative. Let no one be shocked: decoration is a *parole maudite*, a dirty word in the modern tradition, yet there is nonetheless a clear need to go back and reflect on the significance of the term and on the fundamental meaning of the notion of decorum that underlies that of decoration. I am aware of the decisive signification that this term exercises in, for example, the thinking of Leon Battista Alberti and in humanist aesthetics generally. Here, however, I mean to propose a different use of the word. As it is most commonly employed, in the sense it has in the decoration magazines, in its everyday use, the decorative is

archaeology comes into its own as a tool for describing, in almost physical fashion, the superimposed reading(s) of tectonic reality: of a reality that can no longer be regarded as a unitary whole but appears instead as the overlapping of different layers. Faced with this reality, the work of art can do no more than reread or redistribute this system of superimpositions. The notion of archaeology evidently introduces the idea that what confronts us is not a reality that forms a closed sphere but a system of interweaving languages. Nobody could be so naive as to imagine that, for archaeology, the system of knowledge of the past can be constituted by a simple accumulation of the objects uncovered by excavation. Rather, these objects present themselves as the outcome of a process of decomposition of superimposed systems, systems that nowhere touch, systems that move independently according to their own logic. Language, too, is a diversity that can no longer be read in a linear fashion. We can no longer believe that the reality of a signified responds to the precision of a signifier, as Derrida would say. Instead, it forms a magma that is at once producer and produced. Only a task of deconstruction, a work of analysis and comprehension of the processes of juxtaposition, is capable of elucidating certain relationships.

There is no doubt that this way of thinking has a very direct translation in the experience of the production of form, and thus, by inclusion, of architectonic form. In effect, the experience of certain recent architectures is the experience of superimposition. The signified is not constructed by means of an order but by means of pieces that may ultimately touch; that approach one another, at times without touching; that draw nearer to one another yet never make contact; that overlap, that offer themselves in a discontinuity in time whose reading as juxtaposition is the closest approximation to reality at our disposal.

At the same time, the relationship between archaeology and language has introduced a fundamental innovation into the discourse of contemporaneity: the centrality of the notion of time. This is, expressly, a time different from the time of the classical age. Contemporary time—today's fragmented reality of overlapping virtual and "real" times that was artistically anticipated in the writings of James Joyce, Robert Musil, and Mario Vargas Llosa—is presented precisely as juxtaposition: a discontinuity; something that is in complete contrast to a single, unique, closed and complete system. Time in the architecture of the classical age could be reduced simply to zero (as in the experience of Renaissance centrality) or at most constitute a controlled time—a time with a beginning and an orderly and ordered expansion (which was entirely the experience of baroque temporality). In fact, it is not by chance that Giedion's presentation of modern time in *Space, Time and Architecture* begins by analyzing baroque architecture. In some sense, that means that for the first generation of modern architects, time/space was defined as a continuity more than as a fragment or juxtaposition, as it had already been anticipated and explored in literature, theater, music, and other disciplines.

Contemporary time, however, cannot sustain these classical or baroque illusions. It presents itself as a diffracted explosion in which there is no unique and single time from which we can construct experience. There are, instead, *times*, various times, the times with which our experience of reality produces itself. The confrontation with and the attempt to understand this problem of the diversity of times embraces the whole struggle of art in the twentieth century. Time in the cubist experience, futurist time, time in Dadaism, time in the formalist experiences of the optical and the Gestalt experiences of formalism, are versions of a

rigorous and nonconformist position. It is an attitude capable of distinguishing itself from trivial culture, from the perverse operations of market forces, toward which the only valid response is resistance. But alongside this notion of resistance, the idea of *regionalism* seems a good deal more ingenuous. Frampton's concept, of course, refers to a reading of Heidegger, most directly to the philosopher's text "Bauen, Wohnen, Denken." But one must be cautious when one refers to Heidegger, and that caution is not fully visible in Frampton's articulation of regionalism. On the one hand, Heidegger's writing represents a profound diagnosis of the diseases of the modern world: isolation, provisionality, displacement, and failure. But on the other hand, we now know to what extent the former rector of Freiburg's university was associated with the burgeoning Nazism of the thirties, how much he sustained positions that directly opposed the development of technology, and how much he resisted the loss of traditional values, such as the vernacular, the anti-urban, and the archaic, that had historically formed the basis of a reactionary streak in modernism. When Frampton claims for the new vernacularism the resonances of a reappropriation of the sense of place, of light, of the tectonic, and of the tactile over the purely visual—the categories in terms of which he has characterized the new regionalism—he is undoubtedly engaged in a useful operation: that of understanding that a "system" as such is no longer possible, and that it is therefore necessary to understand architectonic reality from a polycentric strategy. Nevertheless, I believe it is naive to accept at the same time the viability of certain tectonic categories that can only be intelligible within the order of the old political urban culture of the classical age, a culture in which building, dwelling, and thinking constituted a unity. What in Heidegger is a tremulous verification of the disappearance

of an already endangered world becomes, in Frampton and in other theoreticians of contemporary architecture, a phenomenologically ingenuous restoration that reveals little or no sense of the contemporary crisis.

Massimo Cacciari, in one of those brilliant and ferocious texts he so often produces, is withering in his dismissal of such excessively immediate interpretations of Heidegger's writings. For Heidegger, Cacciari claims, the metropolitan experience is constructed not through *dwelling* but through *desertion*: a desolation that in some sense constitutes the ground or root of the metropolitan condition. Turning to a late text by Heidegger, Cacciari suggests that, in point of fact, the contemporary metropolitan experience is not one that allows us to speak of dwelling in the same terms as a citizen of Periclean Athens or the Rome of Sixtus V; unlike theirs, our metropolitan dwelling is split, diversified, subject to absence more than to presence. Poetry, that is to say what is vitalizing and grounding, does not construct the entirety of our daily surroundings but is simply the experience of absence. It is the experience of absence, in other words, that draws the contours of the metropolitan subject. If Frampton's proposals are of interest only to the extent that they have expanded the vision of reality and introduced the need to accept as incontrovertible the diversity of modern experiences, Cacciari's critique, underlining as it does the sense of absence, brings us to a concept of central importance in contemporary criticism—a concept that directly stems from this experience of the fragmentary: the archaeological.

The specific use of the term *archaeology* derives from French poststructuralism, primarily from the writings of Foucault, and has been taken up by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and applied to the analysis of literary communication as a process of deconstruction. But this notion of

the course of the sixties—are above all fundamentalist in nature. For the phenomenon of fundamentalism is not to be found only in religion, reactionary politics, and certain specific sectors of society; there has also been a fundamentalism in the field of architectural theory and practice.

These fundamentalisms operate in two directions. On the one hand, there are those who, when confronted with the crisis, have called for order in the form of a return to the essentials of the modern experience. Certain theoretical discourses, sustained by leading academics at the influential Istituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice, as well as certain positions adopted by the New York Five group in the late 1960s, put forth the claim that only by going back to what was essential, germinal, and initial in the modern experience—Le Corbusier's *purisme*, in effect—was it possible to find the true path, picking up once again the thread of authentic experience. These voices called for an established line of orthodoxy and correctness to counter the diversion and diversification of the time. This was, in my opinion, a fundamentalist expression of the modern tradition. While it was understood by some as the recovery of the most pristine language of the avant-garde movements of the twenties, for others this experience served to take them further: they sought the lost tradition of the modern in still more primal origins, tracing the founding moments of modernity back to the primary forms of the Enlightenment.

The architecture of the *Tendenza* in Italy amounted to nothing less than a call to fundamentalism: an attempt at rereading the hardest, most programmatic, most radical architecture of the strictest exponents of rationalism of the interwar years, as well as of the architects of the Enlightenment. It was no accident that this situation saw the popularizing of the most laudatory images of the work

of the most intensely Enlightened architects, in an effort to proclaim origins and a return to original purity. Certainly figures such as Aldo Rossi have taken it on themselves to deny the possibility of this undertaking. Rossi's work increasingly asks to be seen as a process that is above all self-critical. More and more, he demonstrates a progressive loss of confidence in that fundamentalism that was so decisive in his book *The Architecture of the City*, and that has nevertheless metamorphosed in his recent work into an intimate, private game.

Whether it be through such an enlightened fundamentalism or the fundamentalism of a Richard Meier, repeating over and over the linguistic tropes of twenties purism, these responses, for all their good intentions, amount to nothing more than pure historicism. With their fine words and noble aims, they constitute merely nostalgic attempts to return to supposedly authentic roots, whether in Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, in Ludwig Hilberseimer's desolate apartment blocks, in Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's drawings, or in any other source of iconography taken for the wellsprings of the true tradition.

In opposition to this fundamentalist illusion, Kenneth Frampton has proposed in recent years a more dialectical and thus less monist, less self-enclosed approach. With his idea of critical regionalism, Frampton has put into circulation a term that I personally consider somewhat unfortunate, but one that has at least introduced a dualist vision into the interpretation of the contemporary situation. Frampton's proposal possesses two clearly differentiated faces. On the one hand there is the idea (in my view, the more attractive) of *resistance*. In this, he has kept faith with the teachings of the Frankfurt School and with his conviction that only by means of a critical attitude toward reality is it possible for contemporary architecture to maintain a

linked precisely to the practice of the concrete, far removed from any pretensions to the totality of an ontological system. In contemporary experience, the aesthetic has, above all, the value of a paradigm. It is precisely through the aesthetic that we recognize the model of our richest, most vivid, most "authentic" experiences in relation to a reality whose outlines are vague and blurred. If, as Heidegger warned in his meditation on technology, science ultimately becomes routine, it is not difficult to see why culture should have shifted the center of its interests toward those regions formerly regarded as manifestly peripheral. The most "full," the most "alive," that which is felt as being experience itself, that in which the perceiving subject and perceived reality are powerfully fused, is the work of art.

This is not to suggest that in the contemporary world, aesthetic experiences are at the center of the referential system. On the contrary, they continue to occupy a peripheral position; but this peripheral position possesses not a marginal but a paradigmatic value. Aesthetic experiences constitute, in some sense, the most solid, the strongest model of—paradoxically, indeed—a weak construction of the true or the real, and thus assume a privileged position within the system of references and values of contemporary culture.

(We might recall here, parenthetically, the fortunes of the artistic in contemporary mass society. The proliferation of museums, the magnification of the figure of the artist, the existence of a massive consumption of printed and televised artistic images, the widespread appetite for information about the arts, all reflect, of course, an increasingly leisured society, but also relate precisely to the fact that, faced with the tedium of everyday, real, lived experience, of the scientific illusion, of work and production, the world of art appears as a kind of last preserve of reality, where human beings can still find sustenance. Art is under-

stood as being a space in which the fatigue of the contemporary subject can be salved away.)

But we must not forget that this contemporary aesthetic experience is not normative: it is not constituted as a system from which the organization of all of reality might be derived. On the contrary, the present-day artistic universe is perceived from experiences that are produced at discrete points, diverse, heterogeneous to the highest degree, and consequently our approximation to the aesthetic is produced in a weak, fragmentary, peripheral fashion, denying at every turn the possibility that it might ultimately be transformed definitively into a central experience.

The aestheticism of the late nineteenth century consisted precisely in the wishful hope of proposing the experience of art as the backbone of the experience of reality. But it was in this Promethean effort to appropriate to itself something that was fleeting, fugitive, always a little beyond our reach, that the articulating capacity of the aesthetic experience was diluted and that this experience now presents itself as fragmentary and marginal. It is only from this peripheral position that the aesthetic continues to exercise its seductive influence, its power to unveil, its capacity to imply rather than to constitute the intense apprehension of reality.

This referential framework, which has particularly close links with the thinking of the mature Heidegger, also helps to illuminate certain efforts at interpreting our contemporary architectural milieu. With the hopes of clarifying this position, I would like to compare the above exposition with other approaches to and interpretations of the present situation that seem to me to offer much less satisfactory responses to that situation. In the context of architectural culture, and starting with the experience of crisis, the first responses—the responses we perceive throughout

bottom, from beginning to end, but also transversely, obliquely, and diagonally. In some sense, it is only by way of approximations of this kind that the diverse, plural experience of twentieth-century architecture allows us to unstitch and unravel the intrinsic complexity of the modern experience itself.

And it is in this same sense that I propose the utility of the term *weak architecture*. I propose it as a diagonal cut, slanting, not exactly as a generational section but as an attempt to detect in apparently quite diverse situations a constant that seems to me to uniquely illuminate the present juncture. The interpretation of the crisis of the modern project can only be effected from what Nietzsche called “the death of God”; that is to say, from the disappearance of any kind of absolute reference that might in some way coordinate, or “close,” the system of our knowledge and our values at the point at which we articulate these in a global vision of reality.

The crisis of the thought of the classical age, as Michel Foucault called it, is a crisis produced by this loss of a ground, together with the loss, in the field of art, of an artistic project, produced on the basis of a desire to represent. In *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault sets out to explain in painstaking detail how the system of representation belongs to the episteme of the classical age: mimesis presents a certain manner of articulating the world of the visual—and thus the world of architecture; in short, it effectively represents a vision of a closed and complete universe as a finished totality.

But the end of the classical age, which Friedrich Nietzsche announced as an end without return, was in reality the exhaustion of something that still inspires—at least to some degree—what we have come to refer to as the modern project. This end is an “illusion,” but I wish to

bring into play here the ambiguity of that term in Castilian, for it can also express a sense of wishful belief, *ilusión* as simultaneously hope and delusion. Illusion implies a process, and that this process is oriented toward a certain end. In this sense, the project of the Enlightenment, the basis of modernity, still participates in a secular theism, in the idea that it is possible to discover an absolute reality, within which art, science, and social and political praxis can be constructed on the basis of universal rationality. When this system enters into crisis (and it does enter into crisis, precisely as a result of the impossibility of establishing a universal system), we find ourselves faced with the *real* crisis of the modern project and the perplexing—we might say critical—situation of our contemporaneity.

Nietzsche again, in *Human, All Too Human*, speaks of the need for a grounding without ground. In the field of aesthetics, literary, pictorial, and architectonic experience can no longer be founded on the basis of a system: not on a closed, economical system such as that of the classical age; not even on the *ilusión* of a new system such as that which the pioneers of modern design sought to establish. On the contrary, contemporary architecture, in conjunction with the other arts, is confronted with the need to build on air, to build in the void. The proposals of contemporary art are to be constructed not on the basis of any immovable reference, but under the obligation to posit for every step both its goal and its grounding.

I want to emphasize the role assumed by the aesthetic in this situation of the crisis of contemporary culture. Indeed, as is acknowledged in Nietzsche, for example, and also in Martin Heidegger’s appropriation of Nietzschean thought, the aesthetic constitutes a particularly significant reference for contemporary experience. In the system of the classical age, the aesthetic was very much a specific area,

the inessential; it is that which presents itself not as substance but as accident: something complementary that will even lend itself, in Walter Benjamin's terms, to a reading that is not attentive but distracted, and which thus offers itself to us as something that enhances and embellishes reality, making it more tolerable, without presuming to impose itself, to be central, to claim for itself that deference demanded by totality. Decoration, then, or the decorative condition of contemporary art and architecture, not in the sense of vulgarity, of triviality, of the repetition of established stereotypes, but as a discreet folding back to a perhaps secondary function, a pulling back to a function that projects beyond the hypothetical ground of things. The text in which Heidegger deals with the question of sculpture in space, *Die Kunst und der Raum*—a text based on a conversation with Eduardo Chillida, and in fact published with a series of beautiful etchings by the Basque sculptor—addresses precisely this question: that the decorative is not of necessity a condition of trivialization of the vulgar, but simply constitutes a recognition of the fact that for the work of art—sculptural or architectonic—an acceptance of a certain weakness, and thus of relegation to a secondary position, may possibly be the condition of its greatest elegance and, ultimately, its greatest significance and import.

In conclusion, I would like to gloss one last characteristic of weak architecture: monumentality. We must resort once again here to wordplay. This is not a question of monumentality as representation of the absolute. The monument in the classical age is the center, it is the *imago Dei*, the figuration of a transcendent divinity that guarantees the consistency of time. The figure of the king in the middle of the Royal Square thus constitutes the emblem of the power that hierarchically orders a given public space. The obelisk at the central point of the perspective is the

monument that guarantees the coherence and immovability of the representational visual structure. It is not about this monument that I wish to speak, because quite clearly this is the monument that has provoked the crisis in the contemporary situation. The monumentality of weak architecture is not continuous with the monuments of the classical age in either geometric or ideological value, but only in what remains within the present context of that condition of the root term *monitu*; that is to say, of recollection.

Heidegger, once again, in *Die Kunst und der Raum*, quotes some words of Goethe that I would like to repeat here: "It is not necessary for the true always to take on material form, it is enough that it should flutter to and fro, like a spirit, promoting a kind of accord; as when the companionable pealing of a bell rings out, bringing us some little measure of peace." The idea of monument that I want to bring in here is that which we might find in an architectonic object: for all its being an opening, a window on a more intense reality, at the same time its representation is produced as a vestige, as the tremulous clangor of the bell that reverberates after it has ceased to ring; as that which is constituted as pure residuum, as recollection. In his *Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi employed the term monument to signify permanence, because he was then still operating within a monistic conception of reality and a fixed and static definition of the city. In contrast, the notion of monument I have sought to put forward here is bound up with the lingering resonance of poetry after it has been heard, with the recollection of architecture after it has been seen.

This is the strength of weakness; that strength which art and architecture are capable of producing precisely when they adopt a posture that is not aggressive and dominating, but tangential and weak.