CE N'EST PAS ARCHITECTURE
Origins and philosophy of the Non Architecture Competitions.

The treachery of Images, René Magritte, 1928/29, Oil on Canvas

Not so long ago, I was casually assisting the presentation of a graduating architecture student in the Netherlands. To better identify this student among all the students in the world, we will just call him the "Student".

The room was not very big, around thirty seats, mostly taken by other students waiting for their turn to present. Chairs were colourful and modern, probably very expensive, as well as the rest of the furniture. The environment was bright and recently designed, on the tones of red, orange and purple. It was warm, it gave the feeling of a very welcoming environment. Unfortunately the atmosphere of the room was clashing with the nervous presence of the Student.

He had a very high shrill voice, with a strong eastern European accent. He was wearing mostly black clothes - faithful to architects inclination for darkness - while giving his mid-term presentation with poorly controlled anxiety, mostly caused by the presence of one specific person in the audience.

Among the few tutors attending the event, there was in fact the head of the chair where the Student was graduating: a famous Dutch architect, renown in the school for his extremely impolite way to approach students critiques. It was also known that he used to be much kinder and open to attractive female students, but maybe that's not relevant to the story. To differentiate this teacher from all the teachers in the world, he will be named the "Teacher".

That day, the Teacher wasn't expected to attend the presentation. Unluckily for the Student, that very precise day he just decided

to surprise everyone and show up to do the job he was actually payed for. At least for a presentation, or two. Very unluckily for the Student, the presentation picked by the Teacher wasn't given by an attractive blonde girl, but it was in fact held by an Eastern European black clothes-wearing dude.

The Teacher wasn't happy. As soon as the presentation finished he made that clear, mainly focusing on the poorly relevant work previously shown. He largely explained the reasons of his disappointment, right after the Student pronounced his last words. Despite his long argumentation his point could actually be summarized in his final sentence:

"This is not architecture!"

I am sure that many others, studying or practicing the profession of "architect", have heard similar comments. I've heard it myself from teachers and colleagues in at least three different countries, repeated multiple times with multiple connotations and comparative additions.

"This is not architecture, it's product design!"
"This is not architecture, it's engineering!"
"This is not architecture, it's real estate!"
"This is not architecture, It's bullshit!"

Telling someone that their work does not belong to the realm they were pretending to operate, has apparently been used as the most powerful critique for architects. But where does the realm of architecture end or start? Is a dictionary definition enough to establish boundaries? And why being out of those boundaries is considered so shameful for architects?

There is a painting of Magritte - the surrealist master - titled "The treachery of images", that seems to deal with similar issues. It consists in an illustration of a pipe and a tag indicating that the one represented in the image is not a pipe.

The message of the painting might look paradoxical and provocative, but it is actually based on extremely rational and simple arguments. The painting raises issues on the matter of language: what Magritte is saying is that the one in the drawing is not a pipe, but the representation of a pipe.

In terms of language, by assuming that a pipe and its representation correspond, you are joining them into one single concept, creating false information. That information happens to be conventionally accepted, but it doesn't generate any discrepancy between what's real and what we assume to be real.

In the case of the Teacher and the Student, the professor, trying to offend the students, was actually making a formal mistake. He was considering the representation of architecture he created in his mind, as the very idea of architecture. Using Plato's theory of the cave, the professor, chained in a cave, was considering the shadows projected on the only wall he could observe, as things themselves, while they were actually an approximate reflection of real objects.

What the Teacher should have said, if he was more philosophically honest and less irritated, is:

"Your representation of architecture and my representation of architecture don't match."

Unfortunately for the Student that didn't happen, because one of the struggles of our profession is that there is no object, but just representations. A chemist knows that to create a certain compound, he has to mix specific ingredients in a precise sequence. If he gets the recipe wrong, he will get a different outcome. Fire probably, if he is in one of those American high school labs we often see in movies.

Apparently architects and designers don't have any solid scientific reference. They establish conventions to make their profession better fit into a definition, but that doesn't dissolve one undeniable truth: there are no clear limits for architecture, there is no architecture "object" to refer to. And the same goes for buildings or projects. Where does a building end or start? Are data and programs enough to define rules for architecture? Basing on those premises, someone with enough humility – probably not the Teacher – would assume that there is no universally "good architecture". So if with architecture you can't be right, we may as well try to be as wrong as we can.

When this project started, the issue of the limits of traditional architecture became crucial. Our first goal was to produce a research that could exceed those limits. We wanted to produce a study, relevant and innovative, without the aim of establishing our own vision as a model. We didn't want to be the Teacher, telling others through our work what architecture is. At the same time we didn't have sponsors or institutions supporting us, so we didn't have to please anyone and drive the contents in a specific direction, like the Student would have probably done after his critique.

We could be creative in terms of methodology and critically relevant regarding the research produced. We could be both the Student and the Teacher, presenting something out of the range of architecture and at the same time proudly recognizing its specificity. But we couldn't do such a thing alone. We didn't want to. It had to be a collective work.

Surprisingly the competition system, which is often considered to be a very arbitrary process, turned out to be the best tool to provide motivation for other people to join us and express their vision. Despite the prizes and the selection, which were established to challenge all the participants in committing all the talent to the proposal, the contests engaged an international community of designers interested in the topic proposed.

In this plurality of interpretations we found a safe way to an open source research, to say something, but letting others define the message. It was challenging, but if you are reading this book, it means that we – all of us participating - collectively succeeded.

Apparently, to make this group effort work, we just had to state our first fundamental rule, that could make the approach clear to us and to anyone who joined our intellectual mission. We had to state that there were no boundaries, no Teachers and no Students. To say so, we just had to turn an abused critique into our positive mantra:

"This is not architecture". (Yet).

P.S.
In case you are interested, in the end the Student successfully graduated in Architecture. He didn't have much trouble after his mid-term presentation. The Teacher never showed up again and the other tutors, used to his overreactions, quickly forgot about the episode. Luckily the Student's final presentation matched the notion of architecture of all the tutors attending.

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