Resolution:4 Architecture

An Idea of a Site Text

Introduction by
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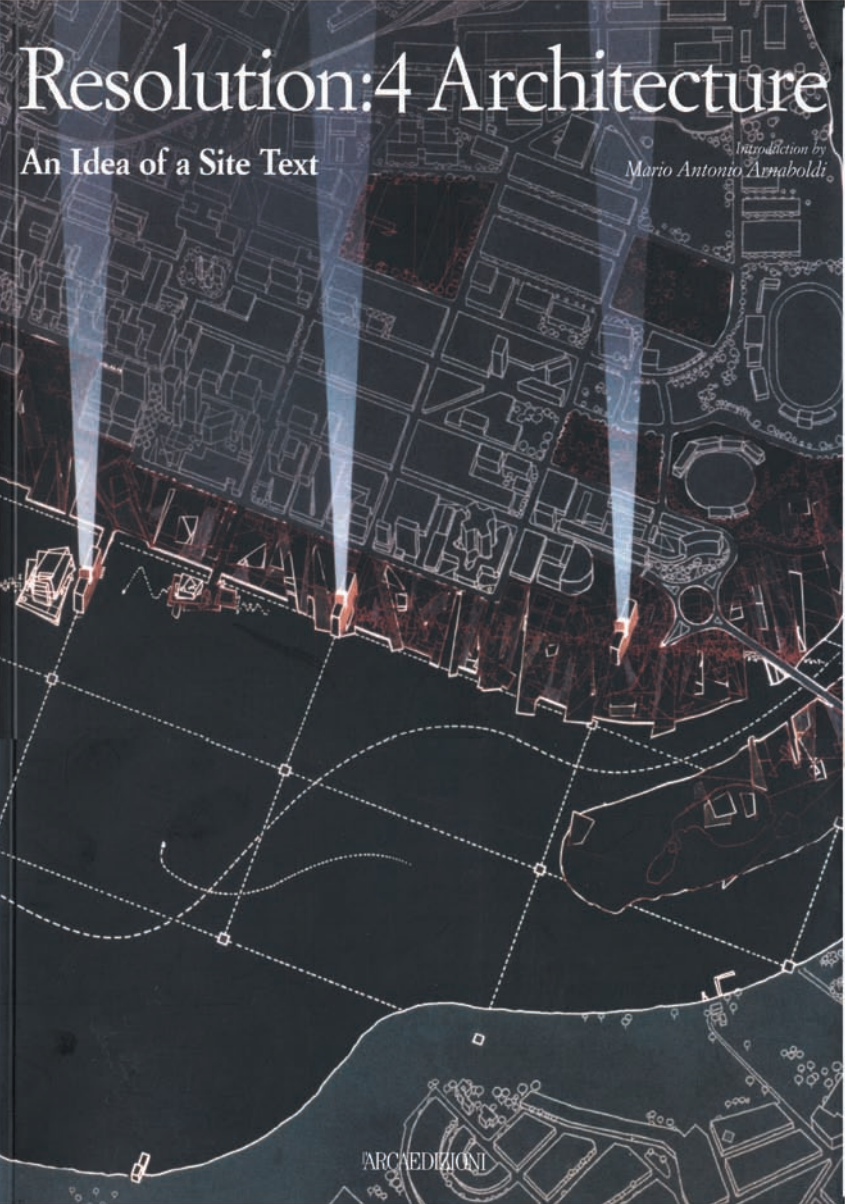

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Resolution:4 Architecture

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Architectural design exerts a considerable influence on the destiny of mankind: it provides a service and, at the same time, is projected towards its own renewal within the profession of architecture itself.

The recently established design practice known as Resolution: 4, which could either be interpreted as "fourth resolution" or, considering the kind of work it carries out, "designers of the fourth dimension", is seeking to create a new form of architecture for newly emerging populations of varying sizes and cultures with different standards of living and balances of life.

One of the practice's most interesting design narratives is the World Park project in Perth, Australia, a disturbingly uneasy tale of expansion reflected in both their minds as architects and sensitivity as human beings. These young architects use architectural experimentation to investigate the possibilities of a new dimension of living/economics. This is less evident in their smaller projects, since they evidently need wide open spaces to express their ideas. Still, this does not prevent them from analyzing gradually evolving human behavioural patterns and their implications on technology. Any truly representative picture of Resolution: 4 and their team work must inevitably focus on those factors weighing most heavily on their design and planning techniques.

One of the most vivid examples of this design method is the architectural idea underpinning the Wainaku Mill Hotel project in Hilo, Hawaii.

This project is both a form of experimentation and, at the same time, at the service of experimentation, in perfect harmony with the most recent analyses of economists, sociologists, and political commentators. In other words, the key to their work lies in the way they cater for the combined effects of both technological and economic progress; and the peculiar way they manage to draw out intriguing design conclusions, particularly in their large-scale projects.

It ought, in fact, to be pointed out that the average individual income in major consumer societies is actually increasing, although the gap between the rich and poor has remained the same; on the other hand, products and consumption, which are capable of promoting people up the social ladder, inevitably lead to a state of notable anxiety due to growing expectations.

Growing expectations and the increase in the amount of leisure time available have, in this respect, inevitably caused young people to grow up more quickly in what is becoming an increasingly permissive society.

This rather incomplete picture of the developing trends in contemporary society leads us into a more careful analysis of Resolution: 4's evolving experimentation. It is worth examining just what makes the team tick on a creative level. They have got a clear idea of what it takes to create new cities capable of encompassing changes in the working environment/population and of harnessing the transformations required to gear urban planning to innovation. A form of innovation grounded in a union of various different scientific practices and designed to celebrate social life as an expression of modernity. These New York-based architects also pay careful attention to not making indiscriminate use of technological progress. They draw on experimentation to create a modern way of living and intervene in production to lay the grounds for the most appropriate style of contemporary community life.

They seem to be striving to give contemporary life its own characteristic identity by

designing territorial structures epitomizing the society in which we live; structures projected towards the future instead of just copying the lifeless remains of old-fashioned styles.

Their projects are reminiscent of the way in which Guy Debord describes the spectacular evolution of Western society in *The Entertainment Society*, claiming that art has now gained the upper hand over philosophy. This is in fact true. I have pointed out on several occasions that contemporary thought has inverted its priorities from "art-philosophy" to "philosophy-art", since, in the past, classicism, the Renaissance, the seventeenth century, and other later developments, found a common denominator in the symmetry of parts. This vision has now changed. Nowadays, attention is no longer focused on modernism, postmodernism, relativism, Ptolemaic decadence or Calvinism.

Violence and indifference have now given way to negotiation, we have become the champions of transparency against public squander and the fear of major enterprises. Generally speaking, society is against any form of dictatorship or demagogic regime, setting its sights on a new notion of virtue. The centre, which used to be a starting point, is now a destination that can only be reached through careful meditation and a common grounding of sentiment and feeling. The collapse of old-fashioned academic institutions and classical systems is bringing with it a decadent form of symmetry. Resolution: 4 is well aware of all this, which is why it is opposed to the recycling of the dictates of the past. They have totally abandoned symmetry, which is merely emphasized as being a result of the new notion of space which, as they well know, Euclid, Einstein and Mandelbrot helped to create, as if simulation were to take the place of reality.

In the wake of this rush of thought, Resolution: 4 has once again demonstrated its awareness of the fact that "contemporary ideas" are like a cluster of crystals which, as part of a system, have a superior level of symmetry that almost seems to correspond to some greater system. This system of thought provides the framework within which their design work tends towards a common core of intents; it is as if they had freed themselves from a scholastic conception of planning and design. Both Westerners and Orientals at the same time, they are fundamentally part of the hemisphere but not in any absolute sense.

Nature and culture are fused together in their idea of architectural design, as their weariness of old-fashioned culture stretches to the extreme; it is as if their projects can really sense the transition from libraries to video-libraries, as the space of learning dissolves into time. It is time that marks the surpassing of preservation as it takes on the symbolic value of annulment. The underlying ideology of their new projects and the basic mode of presentation and implementation of their state-of-the-art production is deeply entrenched in this background scenario of events. This new "elliptical form" of classicism they are appropriating derives directly from their peculiar sense of artistry.

The mathematical thought underpinning these young architects' work produces forms of great simplicity; when the Resolution: 4 team envisages a city or an entire territory for the future, paying due attention to the latest technological developments, their thoughts take on a distinctly elliptical configuration. These are the foundations on which it grounded its project for the Nara Convention Hall in Japan. The project hinges around an ellipsoidal layout in which the sum (not difference) of the distances of each architectural function from two fixed points is a constant. This determines a new form that allows both

time and energy to be saved in day-to-day living. The design seems to curve space and each point along its unextended line is located at a point inside a circle and ellipse, which represent the curved spaces describing the underlying layout of the entire complex. In other words, numbers ultimately play a decidedly functional role in determining its shape and structure.

The "forms" of their projects are not just fanciful whims of incompetent architects, they are actually the inevitable consequence of the intellectual, social and technical conditions of the age in which we and they live. Like genuinely "competent" architects they draw their new forms from everyday life and present them as fundamental departures from the past. They know that they have to break with the past if they are to project design into the age in which we live, using new technology to lay the foundations of a new society. They also know that they must abandon old-fashioned styles once and for all, if we are to rediscover our purity of spirit and elaborate new forms of awareness. Resolution: 4 draws on these phenomena to shake the general public out of its indifference in an attempt to convince us that the problems associated with architecture have real consequences for our lives, determining changes in our public and private behavioural patterns. Combating mannerism in the name of individual style must be a categorical imperative for society as a whole, if we are to prevent cities from becoming architectural replicas that pay no attention whatsoever to context or tradition. This New York-based team seems to be well aware of these problems, which is why, despite the difficulty of the task at hand, it has decided to try and invent its own new architectural style.

The projects it has so far designed show no sign of the crisis in which rationalism is supposed to be floundering. On the contrary, they are concrete evidence that, despite its "age", rationalism still has a guiding role to play in the name of tradition. Modernity, that promised so much, is also an "unfinished project", if, as Nietzsche insisted, it "draws us away from our origins" and takes the joy out of life. As Heidegger pointed out, far from putting people in command, the essence of technology is something which man, by his very nature, just cannot control.

Resolution: 4's projects show that the idea of modernity may also be a nightmare, as epitomized by contemporary society itself. Habermas described it as "a deceitful symbiosis" between rational forms of life and technological control of nature which, according to him, "has swept the criticism of modernity onto the agenda". Recapturing time, according to Ilia Prigogine, is a revolutionary act of Copernican proportions: instead of treating the irreversible phenomena surrounding us as due to our approximations in describing nature, we need to incorporate them in mechanics and alter the way we represent the laws of dynamics, which ought to be a study into the evolving probabilities of any given system. As we examine Resolution: 4's projects, we can see how they are trying to weaken the grip of functionalism on design in order to link together factors related to knowledge and aesthetics, thereby diminishing the impact of reason without discarding it altogether. Their designs derive from instability, nostalgically evoking the critical attack on the International Style, dating back to Foster, that ought to have carried the project of modernity to its conclusion. It is Habermas's "hope that has changed beyond all recognition" that may allow us to glimpse signs of a breakdown in the crisis of existence.

This is, of course, a utopian dream, but it not less certainly an that intriguing thing about

the projects designed by this team of young New York architects is their deep understanding of the great world of Architecture. It is their ideas about "chaos", Benoit Mandelbrot's new interpretation of mathematics, and René Thom's theory of catastrophe, that radically transform traditional approaches to design into a different vision of architecture. It would be rather naive to think that they can shake off all previous assumptions and construct their own "in vitro" theory of knowledge; in actual fact they merely confine themselves to effecting semiological readings.

Our new age of classicism depends on new means of controlling and determining thought: we have moved beyond modernity into a different vision of the interaction between nature and culture. But is this enough to surpass modernity or, in other words, exercise "the evil spirit of unstoppable progress", the ghost that Horkheimer and Adorno contrasted with the Enlightenment and that Michel Foucault re-evoked in his "unmasking" of human sciences? This is perhaps what we really need to known if we are to construct that new linguistic-practical conceptual scheme within which Resolution: 4 is trying to find some way of grounding a new classical spirit.

We need to insist on the role that these designers have confiscated for their own purposes, a role of dissent and of creating a new idiom projecting them on to those fundamental values capable of grounding in sentiment the newly emerging strands of knowledge destined to shape our future.

These philosophical investigations only go to show what a daunting task they have set themselves, how deeply involved in architecture they actually are, and what a great responsibility history has placed on their shoulders. We might advise them that the most "human" thing they can do is to carry on voicing their deeply held beliefs as simply and sensibly as possible and to accept their consequences. This architectural responsibility will, of course, make them vulnerable to others. It should also be pointed out that the richness of architectural history has allowed them to express their own design language with great spontaneity. The way they have trampled on conventions is reminiscent of a great name from the past: Leon Battista Alberti, a notable scholar of architecture who managed to find the right balance between aesthetics and ethics, technology and invention, the power of creativity and the rational techniques underpinning architecture. Burckhardt drew on this legacy in his *Italian Renaissance Art* that elaborates on Alberti's concept of "concinnitas" (measure and elegance). The list of words that various authors have employed in trying to express the true contents of architecture is almost endless. Technique and linguistics or alternatively utility and beauty are just more key words that seem to allow us to treat the principles of design as an imaginary "invention". Resolution: 4 and its designers' mathematical reading of architecture allows them to set up a constant state of interaction between theory and arithmetical practice that produces a continually evolving socio-economic system around which to organize project themes.

There are words that naturally lead on to a certain line of thinking and words that guide the decision-making process. But attention also needs to be focused on the way in which they give voice to the kind of technology that is currently transforming the image of architectural design. These words can ideally be transferred into the newly emerging worlds of virtual reality, a disturbing chapter in the history of computer science that can stimulate the kind of mental and corporeal experiences associated with drugs. Resolution: 4's projects seem to belong to this new paradigm. Their buildings seem to

embody the paradox Timothy Leary first announced in his *Cyberspace*: expressing a creative potential of great aesthetic-political import. They represent a sort of co-existence between mysticism and industrial society forged into a state of high technology. The architects of Resolution: 4 have already moved beyond McLuhan's electrical revolution. All this means that they operate in the world of experimentation, and the images they design provide a real contribution to the artistic background against which they are created. We know that physical reality is governed by precise laws. But we also know that this kind of experimentation into artificial reality can shake the laws of physics at their very foundations. We are now in a position to actually eliminate the gravity acting on bodies and create imaginary worlds that are perfectly credible. The question is just why does virtual reality naturally come to mind when analyzing Resolution: 4's projects? The answer is that their work latently, but no less genuinely, embodies a process already projected into the near future.

Their projects naturally call for this kind of critical analysis, drawing, as they do, on the latest tools and instruments available to anybody interested in the concept of architectural space. I am mainly referring to the use of computer technology, that takes perception well beyond the limits we are accustomed to, and newly emerging high-tech tools such as lasers or telematics that turn out to be fabulous interpretative "media". Reality, on the other hand, is increasingly governed by micro-electronics that enable material to be used with infinitely greater precision than before and in ways which are beyond our usual realms of perception. The use of materials and the scale of form and function have now entered a quite different economic dimension. This is why the architects of Resolution: 4 have abandoned the idea of ornamental decoration, inevitably associated with refined elegance and technological intuition. Their architectural space is geared to an electronically-determined minimalist reading of space. Examining their projects with careful attention, we can see how they tend to move beyond the idea of generating forms governed by some sort of figurative weight of gravity, thereby taking space beyond space itself; some sort of coded reading of a situation or environment mediating between feeling and artifice. The spatio-temporal patterns governed by relativity under the control of micro-electronics produce quite surprising results. It is easy to imagine how their representations of space are moving further and further away from old archetypes of rational-functional forms. Their artistry exploits the language of mathematics to project their creative intuition into the future, leaving the recent past at its heels. It is only fitting to conclude this critical reading of the work of Resolution: 4 with a quote from Leon Battista Alberti: *"Architettore chiamo io colui il quale saprà, con certa e meravigliosa ragione e regola, sà con la mente e con l'animo divisare, sà con l'opera recare a fine tutte quelle cose le quali, mediante movimenti di pesi, congiungimenti ed ammassamenti di corpi, si possono con gran dignità accomodare benissimo allo uso delli uomini"*.

Architects' Statement: Stray Paths

Some Notes on the Idea of a Site Text

After having worked several years in "name" offices, we have formed a partnership in 1990 that is concerned with establishing a critical practice based on both practical and theoretical issues. While at these well-established offices, we have participated in the tried and true practice of stressing product over process, the known over the unfamiliar, the form over the formation. It is with this professional background that we turn our focus to the design process. This concentration might best be described as investigations down "stray paths", without on emphasis on a preconceived end-product.

What does it mean to practice architecture critically in an age of informations? The ability to access information at any time is reframing our traditional context. No longer can our belief systems exist within a single frame of reference or be seen from a privileged point of view. The myth of the singular heroic architect is dead. Familiar products have been perpetuated by the comfortable process of design and its connoisseurship. The need for multiple readings and meanings exists. Our response to this new age is embodied in our exploration of the production of an architecture.

Our stray path focus has been on the re-analysis, re-interpretation and re-presentation of existing "essential information".

Our experiments are woven within the intentions of the design process, a blurring of the privileged frame of reference. Our re-interpretation of this blurring is what we call a "Site Text", created through a process of superposition, of layering, of analogous elements and ideas through specific registrations.

The production of an architecture can be described as the continuous process of layering, copying and tracing of information. For us, this process of creation is read as a text that becomes a (destabilized) foundation for the projects' conceptual landscape. This fabricated text is sometimes viewed as a series of scaled relationships that are slipped, dislocated, cut, folded and reregistered, suggesting a process of formation not possible without this type of operative.

The production of a Site Text is a process that allows us to participate with each project's specific context, while not being imprisoned by the "contextual" in the privileged traditional sense. We believe in the study and understanding of an architectural history in that we can refer to and defer from it: NOT to be policed or governed by it. This method of our "stray path" excursions has shown us that the formal representation of architecture, when dislocated from the constraints of nostalgia and history, becomes a process that is fluid, non-linear, and unpredictable.

The following projects attempt to reveal latent form-generating issues by re-analyzing each project's inherent "context". Our reading of this edited information is screened through a series of initial analyses, which is then re-

recorded and re-analyzed becoming the raw material for the transmission of a Site Text. In other words, it is a new network, or matrix, of information uncovered through the "art of making copies" from other forms of information. The resolution of the text allows us to explore issues of form-making that could be viewed as outside of the traditional realm of production, while within the realm of architecture. This blurs the starting or reference point and can trigger new combinations and permutations, especially when contaminated with an architectural program. The fold or juncture between text and program also becomes a stray path investigation in as much as this becomes a dialogue between the project's general and specific attributes. It is here that the residue of specificity in each individual project emerges. The re-interpretation of this information into a two-dimensional graphic allows us a format to explore traditional readings of each "site", while at the same time it invites readings from other points of view. Other readings of the Site Text extend beyond the (implied) boundaries of its (imprinted) cover, referring and deferring to its past and future conditions, while suspended in a constant state of becoming. The process of the Site Text's "present", although never yet *final* state, is re-presented as the architectural project. The simultaneity of readings within each project is an attempt to prevent one singular or privileged reading, thus re-framing each project's "con-text" within this Information Age.