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English

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Livio Vacchini and timelessness

It is almost impossible to capture a timeless expression while relying on supposedly immutable architectural principles. All attempts to achieve this, no matter how concerted they may be, are doomed to failure: time will unfailingly catch up with whoever strives to capture the essence of timelessness, and no building can elude the mark of historicity.

But why should some architects be so set on this idea? Or more precisely here, why ask this question of Livio Vacchini's work? The architect himself is implicitly drawing us to the question, since he nurses the conviction that rules and principles are necessary, indeed indispensable, for the project. When these rules and principles are expressed in words, they aspire to universality and, by the same token, to time, if not timelessness.

Vacchini has always drawn us into a succession of constructed buildings that are as much stages of a development – a stage being the culmination of a process – as the starting point of a new conception, reshaping and re-launching of a progressive movement. In this movement, a project starts from self-examination in an attempt to understand and evaluate, a posteriori, the path followed in order to confirm, invalidate, criticize, but above all, and most often, to re-orientate the work undertaken, assigning it with more exact and explicit goals. In the same succinct way that I describe it, Vacchini's work is imbued with an undeniable formalist dimension, because his pertinence depends on his capacity to view his own work with a critical eye, because criticizing his own results boosts the advancement of his own work, continually striving towards a higher degree of coherence. As one

stage follows the next, this criticism should be conducted to increasingly demanding and strict, even dogmatic criteria. In doing so, one time frame only is observed, and certain parameters are consigned to the garbage heaps of a past that can only now be considered as incurably out of date: has the architect himself not leveled ironic and cutting remarks at his previous buildings, even if he remained somewhat sentimentally attached to them? This unyielding way of conceiving architectural work is the hallmark of Vacchini; it is almost Hegelian and therefore must involve essentialist research.

In order to at least illustrate, if not prove the validity of the interpretation that I advance of Vacchini's work, I will refer to three main stages: that of the sixties with the Losone School and its gymnasium (1972–1975), the Macconi building in Lugano (1974–1975) and the gymnasium of the Ai Saleggi school in Locarno (1978); that of the eighties with the Montagnola school (1978–1984) as a flagship building; and finally that of the nineties, for which I will look at the house at Costa-sur-Tenero (1990–1992) and the Losone sports hall (1990–1997).

The sequence of these three stages brings to light the radicalization of an architectural work project. The first stage is that of learning, not so much a language as the need for a rule to guide the development of the project, a rule that takes its reason from all syntactic declensions, a rule that here comprises the rational expression of relatively conventional constructive choices. In Losone, Lugano and Locarno, the vertical supporting components (pillars and columns) and each horizontal component (lintels and architraves) outlines the structure of the building; the rhythmic flows, dimensions and proportions are regular and executed with skill. We are confronted with the myriad possibilities of order and its quasi pedagogical expression. No wonder then that we could talk of classicism at the time: the implicit aim was to achieve a stable mode of expression, which obeys an intelligible law, an expression that moreover leaves little room for individual sentiment.

There are, however, hidden dangers in choosing a path already taken by others, namely,

in this case, adopting a classicist approach: the moment you think you have reached universality, and thereby timelessness do you not find yourself instead on the path to a new kind of mannerism?

Vacchini's response to these pitfalls can be found in the Montagnola school. This construction is testament to a change in the scale of problems encountered thanks to a change in the very conception of construction data. For example, although the Losone gymnasium linked all the combined components right down to defining its profiling, its unity, on the other hand, was the result of a composition of fragmentary parts. It is exactly this problem of unity that the Montagnola school is addressing; seen from this angle, it is a building of transition and the understanding it reveals of the architecture of Louis I. Kahn is no mere coincidence. Vacchini himself refers to plagiarism when describing the composition of the façades.

In the Montagnola building, unity of form is embodied in a new order of steps followed, illustrated by the interior portico, the spans of which have the same dimensions as the lateral side of the courtyard, with lintels punctuating pillar to pillar. Fewer intermediary supports are thus required, which would only break up the overall unity. A kind of reciprocity brings structure and space together, defining the unity of form: this is where Kahn's lesson comes into play, which is most apparent at the British Art Center in New Haven. Having already embarked on this road, Vacchini can only aim for a more radical approach, taking his work to new limits. In order to do this, he puts even fewer components to use, just as he narrows down the scope of possible reference points, with few buildings capable of reflecting the new demands. Ideally and for each variable, the equation from which a building is formulated will soon be solved by using one solution only, thus transforming architectural work into an essentialist quest.

The house at Costa-sur-Tenero and the Losone sports hall are the clearest representations the third stage of progression. In both buildings, on the vertical plane, only one kind of pillar is used, reproduced as many times as deemed necessary and without variation, while horizon-

