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De Virtute Radicali Consilii

Monograph Topos Atelier

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"It is essential therefore to exhibit a precise intention, and to have had ideas in order to be able to furnish oneself with an intention.
A plan is to some extent a summary like an analytical contents table. In a form so condensed that ir seems as clear as crystal and like a geometrical figure, it contains an enormous quantity of ideas and the impulse of an intention." [1]
Le corbusier

Two features emerge from projects by the Topos studio. The first one is the almost systematic implementation of an autonomous enclosure, sometimes made from scrarch, sometimes based on existing elements. This enclosure, a complex component that is more than a simple physical wall, is made of a single material and is designed in the most continuous possible manner. Creating it leads to a differentiation between the thermal envelope and a vaster architectural interiority. Such inclusion of an inhabited shell within a larger one generates specific details that express this interleaving through a combination of formal systematic creation of an autonomous enclosure, sometimes produced from inventiveness with "craft" (in the sense of a mastery of techniques).

The second feature is the manner in which this initial shell has an "inside" concretized by a furniture component that, in addition to its specific functions, is installed in a way that ensures the division of space required by use. A dialectic then arises between the outer enclosure and this "meta-furniture": the autonomy of the enclosure is underscored by its relative indifference to the complexities of the furniture and, inversely, those complexities are underscored by the autonomy of the enclosure. Materials are also differentiated: usually masonry for one, and wood for the other. The purposes of each of these two components remain clearly distinct, for this approach assigns the enclosure the responsibility of being the project. This conception of the relationship between architecture (created by the enclosure) and everyday life (organized by the furniture) offers key analytical insight into the work of Topos. The inventive reduction of functional issues to the coexistence of meta-furniture and architectural structure with distinctly different purposes is something that the modernist movement never really explored[2]. Exhaustive study of this question would require an entire book. Thus, this article will be limited to three particularly representative projects in which Topos resorted to an original kind of projective radicality that is simultaneously free of virulence and essential to an understanding of the work.

The first project discussed here might be linked to the plan that Le Corbusier, among his four compositions, described as "very difficult". The building is a hotel in Ponte de Lima, Portugal. The site included a Roman and medieval bridge, the Terceiros Monastery (built in the fifteenth century, altered in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries), the chapel of Nossa Senhora da Guia (Our Lady of Guia, built in the seventeenth century and altered in the eighteenth) and the Italian Theater (built in 1896).

The project is delineated by a simple rectangular volume set on the site in reaction to - or in resonance with - that site through an effect of strong contrast between existing structures, viewed as a coherent ensemble, and a foreign body that simultaneously provokes and reveals them, the project is based on the tension created by newness set within what still exists, the building is a platonist body, white and devoid of signs indicating its practical function.

Ponte de Lima monuments

The two abstrat facades of Ponte de Lima Hotel

This formal asceticism is set in a urban context rich with the small buildings mentioned above: they recount the history of a place structured over a long period, for which a complex *écriture* might seem more appropriare[3]. But when the architects analyzed this small urban setting, they apparently concluded that the quality of the site stems not from the picturesque features of pre-existing elements but from the spatial, aesthetic, and symbolic tension arising from the juxtaposition of these four autonomous objects from different periods, arranged with no particular articulation. To perpetuate this genius loci, Topos added to this urban scene a new element that would achieve an intensity equivalent to the elements that preceded it. This quest led them to devise a building conceived contrary to classic principles, given its hovering quality, its proportions, extensive cantilevering, and opacity with respect to

Hovering element of Ponte de Lima Hotel

1. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), p. 179.
2. Some of Frank Lloyd Wright's projects nevertheless contain inklings of it.
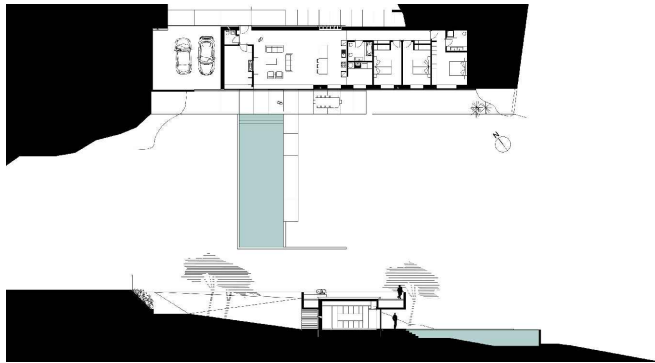3. In such a setting, the likes of Scarpa, Portoghesi, and Hans Hollein spring to mind.

its content: all these decisions were based on appropriateness to the site, with no particular deference to standard guidelines for the hotel inhabiting it.

The project's muteness is not designed to stress the complexity of the classical architecture surrounding it, which would reduce it to a foil. Instead, it conveys the decision to produce an equivalent, indeed a rival, to existing construction. The project thereby challenges the ability of the standard guidelines to create architecture. From this viewpoint, the role of function becomes limited to supplying the flesh on a body whose form and urbanistic aim transcend it.

This strategy is not based on architectonic "know-how" nor is it related to *écriture*. Rather, it entails a "conceiving-how" things related to context. The conception behind the initial site was pushed further, and this understanding of the site - and the observational skill it supposes - made it possible to add to what might already seem finished. This kind of radicality does not merely mean sparking a confrontation within an historic setting. On the contrary, it involves a desire to perpetuate things through architectural means, it is a quest for a new, palpable harmony that transcends form.

The second project I will discuss shows that it can be equally radical to decide to blend oneself into - rather than "confronting" - all that has preceded.

The Alcobaça House in Estremadura is a "landscape-project", a metaphor of the singular features of the site hosting it. The house is inlaid into the ground, extending in a line like a simple fold in the terrain, featuring a patio nesting behind the inhabited volume, kind of hollow eroded into the surface of the plateau.

This layout - which has certain similarities to Carlo Scarpa's Villa Ottolenghi - displays its design principle in a sobriety that contrasts with the surrounding nature, long shaped by human hands. The simple, elemental aspect of the forms, like the taut horizontal line of the view framed by a cantilevered roof underscores the intent to incorporate the building into the terrain in order to appropriate the landscape. One enters the interior through a rift that suggests the existence of a cave, but only for a moment - there are no other rupestrian features or cryptic allusions. Here we sense a determination to create architecture solely from the arrangement of spaces between themselves, which I call topology. It would seem that this topological intention serves as the matrix for all of Topos's projects.

Finally, let us study the Quinta do Lago house overlooking the golf course at Loulé, near Faro, which could be related to the last of the four Le Corbusier compositions mentioned above, namely the "very generous" one. It embodies that quality by creating multiple intermediate spaces that detach the inhabited interior from a porous enclosure. It frames visions of the landscape from the house and, inversely, reveals to outside eyes only what it wants to show.

The enclosure generares numerous views that form juxtaposed tableaux, which, assembled together mentally, create unity and impart a deeper meaning to the sense of habitation. In a way, this is a "polyptych project" that narrates the landscape and distinguishes specific relationships between the landscape and various parts of the house.

The Alcobaça house's plan and section

The Alcobaça house built into the plateau and the crevice that serves as access

Landscapes and interior spaces framed by the porous enclosure at the Quinta do Lago House

The "in-between" of Quinta do Lago House

Humans arrange their own little world within a vaster one that they only partially welcome. Here again, there is no need for architectonic complexity to express this intention. The planes unfold in space in a way that yields both an interior defined by light and an exterior that is sculptural and transparent[4], set in the landscape like a work by Sol Lewitt.

Topos's work, in its diversity, presents us with highly elaborate topological developments. A project's fabrica first of all considers what is already there. It seeks whatever might shape - indeed, predetermine - relationships between the various components of the project to be designed. Whether these components are endogenous (i.e., aspects of planning guidelines and construction requirements) or exogenous (landscape, geography, history), they will become part of the architect's narrative, of the architect's conversation with the site, of the architect's vision of the future site. They will bend to the architect's reading of the site. As can be seen, none of the three projects discussed above downplay the role of context. Although the functions remain ordinary (hotel, house), a clarity of intent modulates their architectural expressiveness.

In the first example, that expressiveness asserts its ability to levitate; in the second, its capacity for insertion; and in the third, its deployment in three dimensions. Subsequently, all of each project's constituent elements serve that initial singularity. It would seem that the goal is to make them contribute to an entity whose "character[5]" must always be reinforced in order to enhance the power[6] of a project. The demand that architectural character be expressed unambiguously leads to clarity and radicality. This radicality must not, however, produce a caricature of itself. Its role is to organize the terms of the narrative in a way that retains all its coherence and seductiveness. The radicality of the intention draws margins within which this expressiveness is mastered. It similarly constitutes a language that requires only forms limited to strict essentials.

Let us return to the duality berween enclosure and "meta-furniture". That duality involves a primal inclusion - of the latter in the former - and is reiterated at various scales of the design. This can be seen in more complex situations where the project entails the transformation of an existing building. Two periods come together in a single space, nourishing one another. The existing building represents one level of the narrative, feeding the whole approach. (I'm thinking of the house in Brito and the Axis golf resort clubhouse.) Traces, vestiges, and ruins become additional enclosures - continuous or discontinuous - that enrich the way the useful space and meta-furniture are enveloped.

Related to this idea are landscape projects such as the Braga development.

The architectural intent itself describes the way a project positions itself in the world: in the form of a hovering, platonic body; or in the form of an extrusion from the ground; or in the form of a polyptych. This leitmotif runs throughout the works of Topos.

In every case, this singular radicality generates a dialectical relationship between what the project is, architecturally speaking,
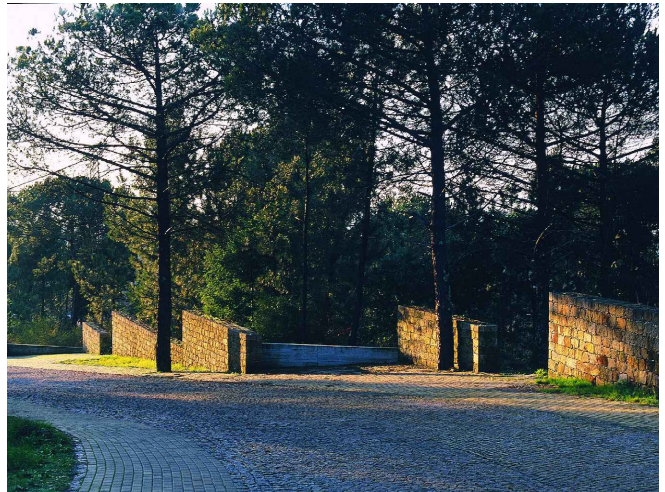
and what it is used for. Topos architects view "habitation" as a stream of inclusions that evoke the primal concept of oikos (οἶκος) which can simultaneously mean home, clan, town, indeed country. Each scale is represented here.

Axis Golf Clubhouse

House in Brito

Braga development.

This approach minimizes the role of typology - which has long been central to the modernist quest - to the benefit of topology. The Topos studio develops a philosophy of spatial configurations that tease out the specificities of a site and then, carefully crafting materiais, comes up with designs that enhance them. The power of the initial intent is such that it liberates smaller-scale design decisions. Implementing the intention calls primarily for skills of plan and section that magnify essentials and mute everything else.

4. "Transparent" in the sense defined by Rowe and Slutzky in "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal" *Perspecta* 8 (1963), pp. 45-54.
5. "Character" is used here in the sense of an "aesthetic value" assigned to the combination of morphology and materiality, independently of the project's end goal. (Gromort, who defined it this way, altered the terms of "conventional representation linked to function" previously associated with it by Beaux-Arts education in architecture).
6. This term does not allude to the representation of some power exterior to the project, designed to celebrate that power. It refers specifically to a power unique to architecture.

Given these observations, it is easier to understand Le Corbusier when he suggests placing an "enormous quantity of ideas" at the service of intention. He implies that the initial intent sterns from the combined potentials of a site, a proposed project, and a mission. That intent establishes the rules of game that must be played if the project is to succeed[7]. His four compositions do not designate objects to be constantly reinvented in order to reinvigorate architectural output. They represent strategic choices available to architects when facing the tyranny of context, namely a complex set of pre-existing givens of all kinds.

The radicality of a project's philosophy does not lead to the production of simplistic, brutal, or exogenous forms. At Topos, intention governs form, function, and preexisting features, thereby transcribing the terms of a narrative. This is what imparts power to architecture, just as eloquence imparts power to words. The more clearly the goal is expressed, the more radical the project may be[8], that is to say entirely devoted to the expression of that intent. All projects that make architectural history display this radicality, from which architecture draws the power that legitimizes its very existence.

7. "When a client stuffs my head with his petty needs, I accept them, I accept
them up to a certain point, when I say no, impossible! Because it goes against the rules of my game, the game at stake: the stakes of this house, this combination whose rules emerged at the moment of design, then were developed, affirmed, and became sovereign. All within the rules! Nothing but the rules. Otherwise, I have no reason to exist. Therein lies the key. Reason to exist: to play ball." Le Corbusier, *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, p. 169.
8. In contrast, the more muddled and ambiguous the goal, resulting from an accumulation of solutions to an endless list of questions of no specific architectural interest, the less possible true radicality becomes, and in the end, the less the project exists.