



(Un)compromising

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Architecture is positive, optimistic by definition. Everyday as designers we solve problems, we see beyond what is here and now. We put great effort turning any constraint in to a resource, a vantage point from which to come up with new ideas, to test new visions.

But I think it's time to liberate this amazing discipline from a fairly widespread misunderstanding, often fuelled by the designers themselves, or by too many curators of exhibitions and architecture shows around the world in which architects are called to display their works: a totally wrong idea underlying the perception that people have of architecture, based on the mythological figure of the architect-demiurge, lonely creator of beauty.

Actually, every good architecture hides a great journey, a complex formative process by which it was, concretely, generated. In which architects/architecture studios are talented directors of a team of different, multidisciplinary professionals, each one with its own key-role: and here at Spacelab we often¹ find these processes much more intriguing than projects themselves.

Starting from these observations, I'd like to take a peek at the seemingly mundane issues faced by architecture during the design and construction process. Trying to understand to what extent these issues have affected the final result, beyond the "creative" hagiography. Finally putting to light that one of the fundamental characteristics of

a project worthy of respect is its ability to successfully govern complexity, generating a remarkable, consistent synthesis made of space, materials, and meaning.

The good compromise

We are so confident about being independent. We pride ourselves on our autonomy, on the purity of our concepts and their immediate translation into the hieratic spaces we are used to designing. Maybe we even come to think of being creators, freethinkers devoid from the constraints of reality and its load of mediocrity. Free to go our own way, paved of our unique personality, capable of inventing entire worlds from scratch.

But deep down we know we lie, though without malice, to ourselves. Because, if we live and work in the real world, we know that here things don't work that way. Here in the real world we can easily realize that architecture, without *compromise*, could not ever exist. Every design project is not only a creation of its author. And architecture *is not a creation at all*, but an amazingly complex process, necessarily linked to a whole series of issues and external influences that can not be neglected.

That's it. When out of its empyrean comfort zone it materializes into reality, architecture has necessarily to deal with gravity, with physical and dynamic forces, with context constraints, with local and national building laws. With *Genius Loci*. With the client desiderata and idiosyncrasies. With politics. With time. With climate. With budget. With the people who will use its space. Every architecture is bound to draw a direction among all these relationships, finding its special way to address all those issues in a physical, technical, technological outcome, if possible also featuring an effective spatial and architectural sense.

And probably one of the most interesting — and also the most underrated — features of architecture is this tortuous path that each project is forced to face to be actually realized. Because architecture is never,

by definition, an instant work. And many projects — unfortunately, or luckily in some cases — do not survive this complex process, and remain frozen in amazing renderings, dotted with evanescent ghosts in spaces that will never see the real life. Other projects suffer such twists that make them at last unrecognizable from how they were conceived.

What we see and recognize out there as 'state of the art' architecture, was not created like magic. Behind it, there is a huge effort: a long process of evolution and refinement of the design concept, which has to cope with and overcome countless trials.

A journey in which architecture (the design project) plays a key role, ruling in the background of spatial composition also other cultural, technical, structural, bureaucratic and diplomatic factors — most of them formerly unknown! A skill which in some cases makes an architecture a true masterpiece. I would say, *despite everything*.

It happens in every design project. The original idea is repeatedly debated, disowned, repudiated, made born again, renegotiated, adapted, stripped, distilled, mediated, revalued: by designers, by clients, by stakeholders, by bureaucratic administrations, by social representatives, by the citizens directly or indirectly involved.

A long, endless sequence of choices and crossroads, not always consistent and coherent. Where choosing how to negotiate (or opt out of negotiating) a compromise can lead to totally different results: see, for example, the American Folk Art Museum issue, a sad example of a downwards compromise outcome.

And the built result, often gone very far away from the former hypotheses, will be the more interesting the higher are the trading skills and resilience of the design team — definitely who take technical responsibility of such choices — adapting the design to external conditions: physical, bureaucratic, economic, social, geopolitical.

It becomes far too easy to refute a suppository, golden autonomy of

architecture if we think, for example, to its close relationship with power, or capital.

Well, I could give countless incontrovertible examples proving that this relationship has always existed, and indeed it is often today as yesterday so much inherent in built architecture as a basic condition of its existence in this world.

Above 98% of the world park of contemporary and historical buildings protected by UNESCO, that we all admire and appreciate, is the result of a series of positive compromises, carefully negotiated one by one by their respective authors towards the clients — high priest, king, sovereign, merchant, patron, authoritarian hierarch, more or less enlightened bourgeois — which gave them the assignment.

So: pristine, amazing built results are the outcome of discussions dealt on tables infinitely broader and more complex than the cliché of a comforting and romantic design studio.

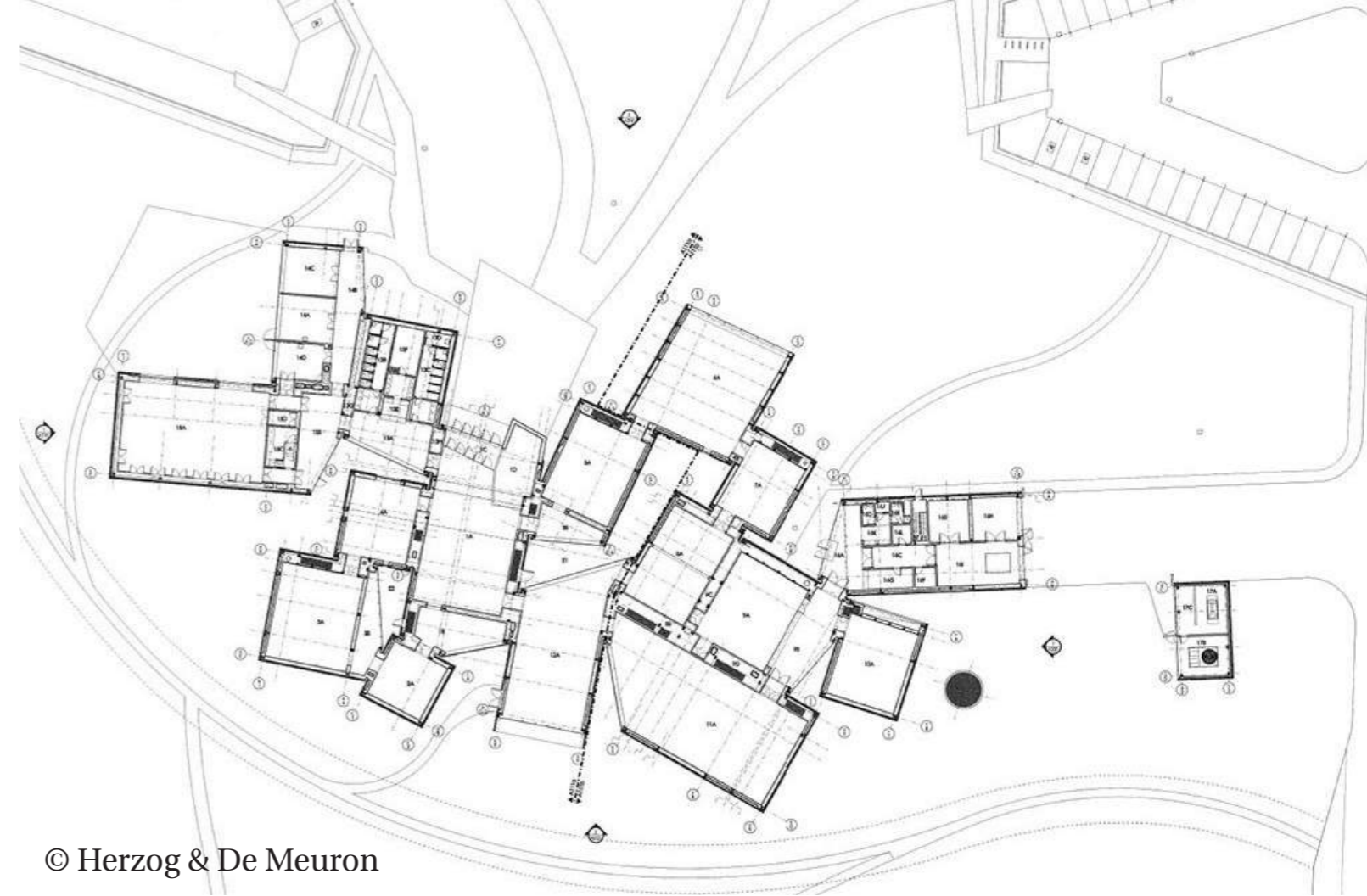
In every single project, “Authorship” and “Consistency”, those simplifications that we are often forced to use to the advantage of a romantic storytelling, have to deal with issues far more pragmatic and probably even more interesting. At least useful to understand how, in the real world, real architecture is actually generated.

Design is negotiating

So: if we try to trace the evolutionary processes leading built architecture from the napkin sketch, “in the beginning”, to the final form, the brick-and-mortar outcome, we might get some great surprises. For each building we could observe and highlight its consistency, its ability to adapt, or — even better — its ability to proactively negotiate the necessary compromises and trade-offs that had to deal with along the process.

I’ll make some examples of different kinds and sizes to better argue my statement.

Take the Parrish Art Museum by Herzog & De Meuron (Water Mill,

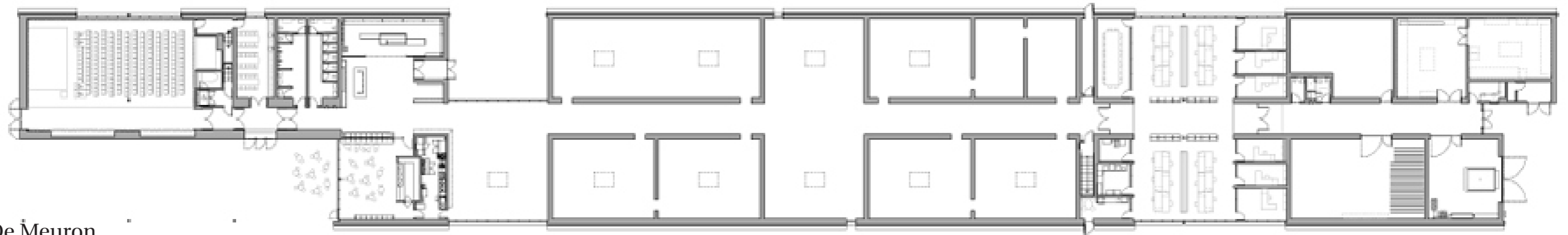


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Long Island, NY 2006-2012). In 2005, the institution acquired an area of 57,000 sqm in Long Island to achieve a new, ambitious venue approximately 3,5km away the original building. Herzog & De Meuron studio was selected among 65 international candidates, and commissioned to design the new building with a more than adequate budget of 80.000.00 USD.

The Swiss duo, with partner Ascan Mergenthaler supervisor of the project team, played² the theme not so much as a mere collections-container, but as a plastic expression of a community of artists placed in their natural space, made of bright environments able to capture all the nuances of the particular light of this part of Long Island.

The result, visible in the design renderings produced for the early press release, was an informal composition of slightly different faceted volumes, a cluster of polygonal pavilions intended as “artist-spaces” freely juxtaposed in an extremely casual ensemble. Each volume



© Herzog & De Meuron

represented a gallery-studio, and would host the monographic works of an artist, with some “anchoring galleries” for the most important collections, for temporary exhibitions or for the common services.

The 2008 global financial crisis led to a drastic reduction of available funds, reduced to less than a third (26.200.000 USD). And the project for the Parrish had to be adjusted³ accordingly. The work of the design team was targeted to typological optimization and cost containment, with a result that, at least in my opinion, has gained in authenticity, with the charm and understatement of the most mature works of H&DeM.

Literally re-formed by the recession — and, like the previous version, conceptually based on the “artist’s studio” typology, in this case achieved subdividing a linear space as extrusion of a minimal hut-shaped cross section — this project is an example of a successful negotiation with something so diriment for an architecture, as the budget may be: in fact, the economic constraints, translated positively and with very firm hand in a clearer strategy of site-occupation, in the typology simplification and wise choice of materials, proved in hindsight great opportunities to explore the values of a simpler composition able to offer a clearer spatial experience and better adherence to the program.

Another example of compromise with the design constraints — that led to more interesting results if compared to the premises — is

MVRDV’s Glass Farm (Schijndel, NL, 2011-2013): this project too has twisted due to criticism from local associations and Schijndel municipality, who forced the otherwise nonchalant authors to the maximum respect of the context with a low-profile design.

Necessary, absolute respect of the municipal building code and sensitivity towards the vernacular context materialized in a smart design solution that successfully hides sculpted shapes and an advanced curtain-wall in a reassuring and friendly image, achieved by silk-screen-printing traditional materials on the glass facade.

OMA, with an epic design group led by Rem Koolhaas and the collaboration of Madelon Vriesendorp, in 1980 won the competition for the design of an extension of a “circus theater” in Scheveningen, a seaside resort near The Hague. In 1984, on the basis of a new brief for the construction of what would become the Netherlands Dans Theatre, the project was changed significantly and adapted to a brand new site, the Spui Complex, in the center of The Hague⁴.

The new context — an area undergoing substantial transformations — was bound by existing, quite strong elements: two slabs, the slope of an abandoned project for an innercity motorway, the axis towards the Houses of Parliament, the site for the future Town Hall, besides a 17th century church — a lonely memory of the once historical centre.

In this case it was necessary for the project to negotiate a triple compromise: a radical change of site, a modification of the functional program, and not least to accomplish the work with a ridiculously low

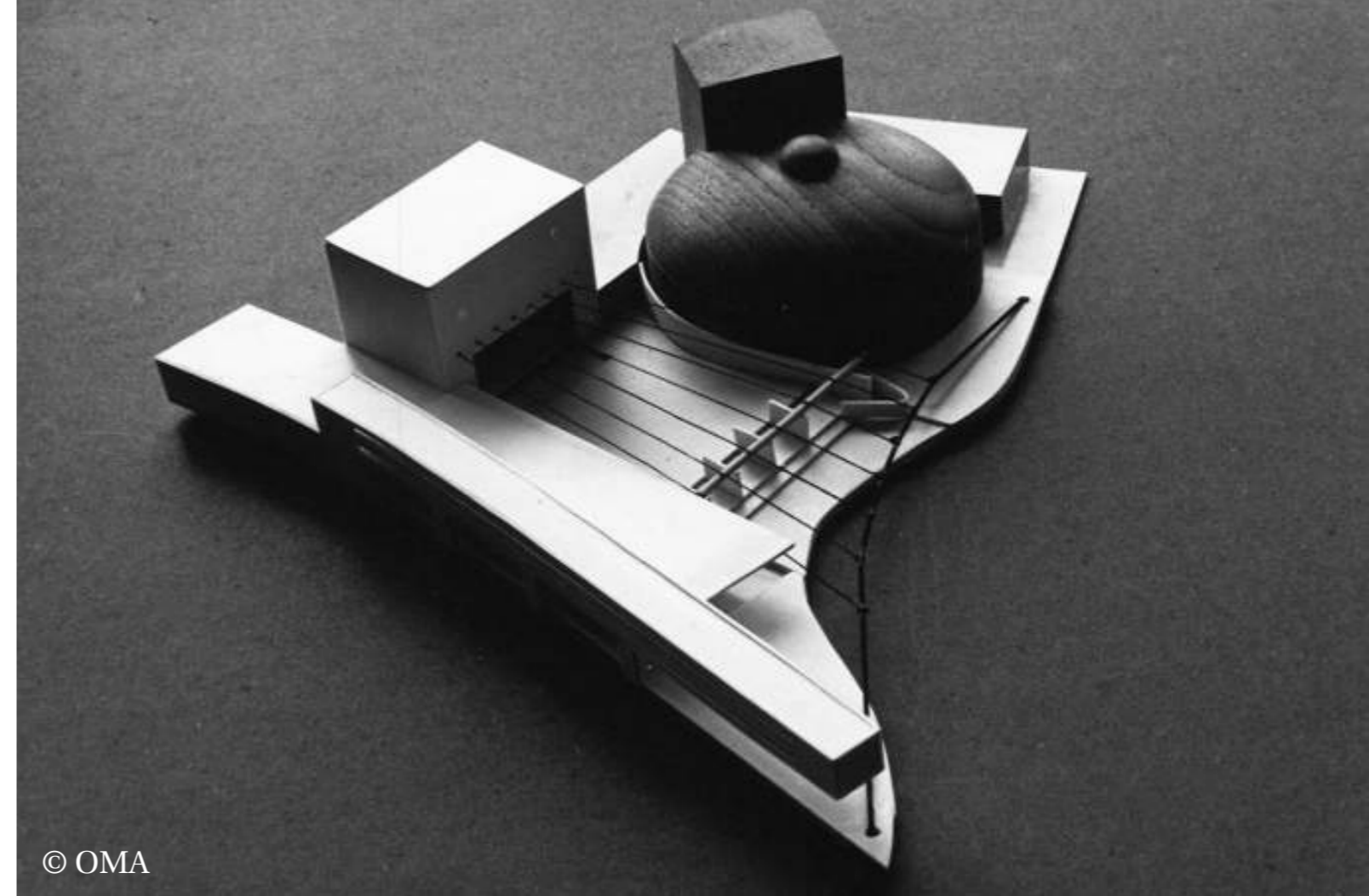
budget. The result was a real architectural miracle: a 54.000mq completed building with the equivalent of only 5.000.000 EUR. A place with a legendary quality for dance events, with a clear and unobstructed view of the entire stage (and — not a detail — of every dancer feet on it) from each one of the 1.001 seats in the main auditorium. The OMA's NDT was universally recognized as one of the best dance venues in the world.

Unfortunately the last performance hosted by this building was held on May 17, 2015: the NDT is now under the blows of hammers, and will be completely demolished⁵ before being rebuilt in another area of the city, with a doubled surface and a budget 35 times greater than the original one. But I am sure that the legacy of this magnificent OMA debut building, an urban device of great complexity settled without apparent effort — one of the most successful examples of positive negotiation between many seemingly conflicting issues — has already been transmitted, and in countless ways.

At the opposite end of the NDT example, sometimes architects and design teams have to lead towards humanly achievable reality the somewhat megalomaniac desires of particularly whimsical clients, in processes that resemble the so-called “first world problems”: frustrations and very-special requests by very-special clients on details that could be solved in many other — far more simple — ways, and with a more than acceptable aesthetic and technical outcome.

We can include these dynamics in the system of relations between architecture and power, and many designers and design teams have been very effective in exploiting with intelligence these opportunities to raise the bar of in-depth technical level — and the consequent built result — of architecture.

A particularly good example of the “ideal of maniacal perfection” that inevitably comes to terms with the “deceitful world in which we all live” is the Apple Campus II: “The Mothership”, as they jokingly call the next Apple headquarters in Cupertino, California — or what in fact will be the *Steve Jobs mausoleum*.



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A project worth 5.000.000.000 USD⁶ to be built at any cost, seemingly without compromise, challenging the physical and technological limitations of building materials, plant engineering and curtain-wall systems wisely selected by the client — Jobs himself, in his last months of life.

Apple Inc. is asking Foster & Partners design and construction standards hardly ever achieved in architecture, «pushing the boundaries of technology in almost every aspect», with the words of the project manager Stephan Behling⁷: inter alia, the glass structural function will be brought to unseen-before outcomes, with seemingly weightless roofs that apparently defy gravity — and actually will come to terms with this inevitable law of physics in a technically unprecedented and extremely elegant way.

It will be interesting to see if the result of this forcibly-upward compromise will actually represent a new, shiny benchmark for manufacturing precision in architecture: in this case, since Apple is frequently found to generate archetypes, I would welcome any form of emula-

tion in this sense — even outside of the product design world, and beyond the formal aspect of this mastodontic building, that at least for now leaves many of us quite perplexed.

With the aforementioned examples I intended to raise the question of what — really — architecture is, trying to highlight the underlying reasons why it is such a special discipline between the major arts: among these reasons there is probably an accurate skill in keeping productively together many seemingly unrelated aspects — some authorial, others really trivial and practical — in a unique, magnificent, consistent work. A work able to get out from the empyrean of *pure creation* and overcome, hopefully brilliantly, the test of the facts.

1.

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