

Interview with Francesco Venezia and Nigel Ryan

NR. In the last ten years or so there has been a proliferation of the use of stone by architects, most especially marble. Indeed architects have again resorted to painting the effect of stone. However you have been critical of the recent use of stone, perhaps you might like to articulate your opinion.

FV. Post-modern architects in my opinion do not use stone very well because the starting point for their use of the material is not constructive. You might say that they use stone in an ideological manner, against the aesthetic of modern architecture. Post-modern architects use stone in protest, in a polemical mode and without a sense of art. I believe that for the most part post-modern architecture is of *Beaux Arts* origin and of course the *Beaux Arts* are not very constructive. In fact neo-classicists use stone in a very decorative manner, not in a structural way.

I have my own ideas for the use of stone. I was always surprised by a feature of classical architecture (by classical I refer to Greek and Egyptian) which I believe to be very important.

There is an antagonism, a battle between the integrity of the form and the way in which this integrity is reached, its construction. It is within this conflict between the integrity of the form, and the apparent disorder of the pieces forming the whole when viewed more closely, that the strength of these buildings resides. When you first view a classical building, you gain the impression of something very compact and united yet upon approaching the building one can appreciate that the unity is achieved by a certain movement.

Neoclassical walls have no such movement; the stones are very regular and "designed". Of course in classical architecture one can find some regularity, but this is not usual.

In the most evolved phase of architecture, an attempt was made to reconcile the contrast between an ideality and actuality; between integrity of form and that which is necessary for its construction. It is a pleasure to see such architecture. An example is an Egyptian relief where the figure is cut at the head and at the groin: the whole is composed of two or three blocks of stone. From a distance the silhouette of the human figure is strong but upon approach the cuts become apparent. The Egyptians used to cut the stone at these specific points, which were controlled casualties. The division of the stone was necessary as to work, install, one block of stone would have been impossible.

Similarly Etruscan terra-cotta sarcophagi were made in two pieces as a piece of terra-cotta 2m-2.5m long could not be fired as one. Therefore there is always this extraordinary conflict between the unity of the form, the reclining figure, and the fact of the cut. A further example is that of an ancient classical column. The structure of a column is a unity, but it can be seen that the cylinder is cut just above the base and also just below the capital. The apparent structure is base, cylinder, capital, but the capital is made of a stone which is also partially part of the cylinder.

This absence of coincidence between form and construction is very important. In a classical

building, the door and windows do not coincide with the systems of the stones, but always cut through the lintel. The same thing is found in old Norwegian wooden architecture. The door frame cuts into a big piece of wood. Similarly in Egypt. There is always this method of conflict; of putting things against things.

In much contemporary architecture, for example that of Ungers or Mies, there is always a coincidence in the geometrical system and the geometry of the material components of the material elements. In a building by Ungers the form and geometry of the material components coincides perfectly with the form of the building. Thus if the building is divided into squares, everything is a square and the square windows do not cut the system of the other squares. In a pavement, the small squares are all **sottomodolo** of the larger squares. And the squares in a metal net/grid are also **sottomodolo**. This destroys architecture because it is a system in which there is no interference—the main module is divided in four and those units are then divided in four. This is an elementary way to use geometry rather than a complex cultivated method. Within five seconds of viewing the building you understand everything and you are totally annoyed because you have captured everything in an instant. When I see these buildings I cannot understand how such mindless things are created after our great heritage of the art of building. I am sorry to say that this tendency, this way of producing architecture began with Mies van der Rohe.

I do consider Mies van der Rohe to be a great architect. Nonetheless he initiated this method. The National Gallery in Berlin, which I believe has a beautiful form is one of the strongest designs using Frank Lloyd Wright's influence. It is very strong, a true temple. However the ceiling inside is in the form of squares which are a **sottomodolo** of the main square. This is a pity because the strength of the square is a little weakened by the obsessive repetition of squares; in granite blocks, in the pavement, in the ceiling; everywhere. The square lives when it is made of figures which are not necessarily squares.

The German school of Ungers has banalised that which in the great tradition of Mies was just a detail but has now become everything. The small perhaps wrong detail has become the architectural system and I do not agree with this position. My response to this kind of architecture stems, perhaps, from my direct contact with ancient architecture, without reading it through *Beaux-Arts* architecture.

NR. I would have thought that this tendency, which in one way is but a manifestation of the conditions that regulate modern production, would have begun with the inauguration of "designed" architecture, with the very beginning of modernity, with the architects of the Renaissance, with Alberti.

FV. Yes but Alberti used two co-present systems. You are right, Alberti and Palladio too, both used a very regular system but both used a constructive system in which the components are very irregular in relation to the regularity of the formal pattern. If you get close to the wall of Palazzo Rucellai you can see that this Albertian system conflicts with the artisan's system. There is a medieval construction system where the stones are all of different sizes. These stones are inscribed, cut with a formal system that is very abstract. Today there is none of this co-presence. When one is in a building of Ungers, one is not in a building of Alberti.

NR. What you are discussing here with the examples of Palladio and Alberti may be said to have been not so much the result of architectural principles than a casualty of history: of the meeting of designed architecture with pre-design building techniques: there was a historic conflict between architectural culture and the building industry. To use a phrase of yours, you have discovered "a happy accident", that the economic contingencies of the constructive aspect of architecture can produce an interesting result.

FV. Yes perhaps you are right. For example Palladio's Palazzo Thiene. You note in the corner

he uses brick together with stone—for economic reasons. This was because the stone used in this period was white Istrian stone and very expensive because Istria was controlled by Turkey. Therefore it was difficult to import stone from Dalmatia. Likewise with Alberti: he had intended that the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini to be constructed totally in white stone from Dalmatia, but was forced to complete it with Byzantine marbles from Ravenna. There is, therefore, a strange conundrum between the white stone and the veined stone. The latter is not classical at all, in fact it is decadent. The Greeks never used marbles as they wanted to use pure colours. Occasionally they applied stucco to the stone as they could not tolerate the figuration.

NR. Here you are hinting at another conflict; an interior conflict within materials themselves, between their substance and image. For example figured stones, especially when polished, function in much the same way as do the painter's materials. In one sense stones thus treated are dematerialised pure image.

Moreover it is a quality that forms a principal component of an architectural tradition that is different from that about which you have been speaking. A tradition which you might say is decorative rather than constructive; perhaps even a tradition of de-materialised architecture. I am thinking here of the thematic treatment of stone by Mies Van der Rohe and Adolf Loos or Alvaro Siza for that matter. Also and perhaps more significantly the Venetian tradition which of course is ultimately Byzantine and therefore Roman.

To what extent are you interested in the figurative quality of stone or perhaps better are you interested in setting up a play between the tectonic properties of stone and its figurative properties?

FV. At this point let me stress that I believe that good architecture can be attained with any material; that every material can give great satisfaction to the architect.

With concrete too it is possible to obtain a complexity very similar to that of stone. I believe the complexity and intricacy of masonry construction can be utilised with other materials. Architects have had most experience with the stone system because as a material it coincided with the great period of architecture. Thus a stone system can aid architects to reach complexity in other materials too. And so it is with normal concrete which can be used in a complex manner.

For example in the house “L” in Lauro I used stone trying to effect a rhythm—using two different sizes of stone and two different treatments of the surface texture. It is the same idea the same system with two very different materials.

Using all that stone has taught us and all its complexity we can use another material in a manner analogous to the ancient Greeks who took the principles of building in wood and applied them to the building of stone temples. That was a case of using the grammar and syntax of wood, changing the material and translating it into a very new system. Indeed we must not forget that all the great stone architecture in the Mediterranean area was derived from wooden architecture. Therefore the technology of wood is present in the grammar and syntax of all classical architecture. Classical buildings cannot be thought of, understood without wood: they are petrified wooden buildings.

And when I went to Norway I found no great difference between its tradition of wooden architecture, totally wooden architecture and the architecture of ancient Egypt. I think that stone and wood which appear to be so distant are in fact the same material.

NR. You have been speaking of a conflict between form and its construction which you consider to be essential to architecture. Viewing your work, another conflict is evident. It is a conflict of geometrical systems or perhaps better an interplay of different figures. For instance you project for Salaperuta.

FV. This is a project which I designed at a moment when I was very interested and involved in the idea that a building may coincide with a body, which is of course a very well known architectural tradition. This is particularly so in the Renaissance from which period there exist many drawings showing a human body incorporated in the form of the church. However I was more interested in the Egyptian rather than the Renaissance approach to this problem, as whereas the latter is somewhat static, there is the idea of movement in the Egyptian tradition.

Some Egyptian buildings have deformations but these deformations do not stem from an inability to build, as the Egyptians had an exemplary capacity for achieving precision. There is the idea of movement in objects, of a “growing up” of forms. Take for example the well known question of the rhomboid pyramid. Some people explain the deformation as evidence of the Egyptians being incapable of building to their initial design and having to change the form in the middle of the building process. I do not believe this is the case. I think they wished to express double form.

Some Egyptian buildings have a deformation in the plan which is derived from this idea of relating the building to the growth of man—this idea is found in the building’s proportional system and its systematic deformation. The system of proportion is not static but relates to a growing figure: it is very complex. It is the highest point of complexity reached by architecture and never afterwards achieved.

The project for Salaperuta was an experiment with this architectural tradition. It is a building in which everything is continually deformed using a strategy of Egyptian architecture—that is—a distortion of the right angle so that it is not exactly 90°—a technique called rhomboidalisation—transformation of the square to the rhomboid. Of course the distortion is very subtle—almost, but not quite a square. This is a technique the Greeks inherited from the Egyptians and used in mouldings, thus always avoiding using right angles. They sharp-

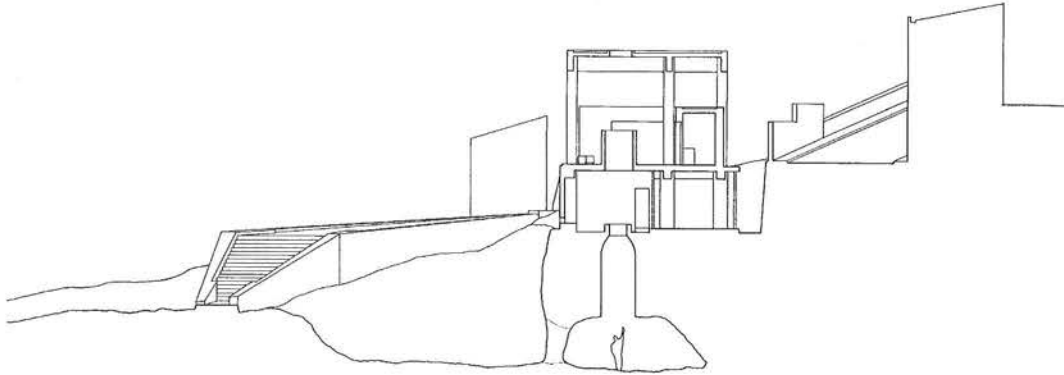
ened the corners. Due to this point which was not static but in tension, their architecture became more dramatic. Moreover the difference of light, the play between light and shadow is stronger because the shadow is deeper.

I have often been to the archaeological museum in Palermo which houses the gigantic fragment of the Selinunte Temple, in which I have a great interest. Normally there is a great distance between the object and the viewer and the latter can sense but not see a certain tension. When viewing this fragment one can at last discover the reason for the tension in the mouldings. There are also sections as the blocks are cut so one can appreciate the whole system. It is most interesting and whenever I am in Palermo I try to visit the museum.

NR. There is also a strong Greek presence here in Naples. It was after all a Greek colony. Nonetheless it would seem as if a tradition has developed here that could be best described as Neapolitan, that is neither Greek nor Roman.

FV. Here in Naples there is a strong presence of the earth in buildings—a co-presence. It is always difficult to perceive, to feel the point at which nature stops and the building material (the tufa) and the artificial action of the building begins. Everything is very connected. For example an architecture which consists of a substance of artificial ground and then a house above this structure. There is always a joke—having something on the earth which is the earth, etc. I believe that from this point of view Naples is extraordinary. Rome for example is very beautiful but in Rome there is not such a strong presence of the earth as there is in Naples. Of course in Rome there is the extraordinary presence of the seven hills which ensures that the city gently undulates; which is a very beneficial form from an urbanistic point of view. In Naples there is a strong connection between the city and the landscape.

NR. Here in Naples and for that matter right around the Bay, there is an extensive tradition of excavated architecture, of an architecture that is cut out of the stone. It is an architecture



of which you have written. Moreover I believe that in your work there is a sense of the subterranean, of the underworld. What precisely for you is the value of the underworld?

FV. In Naples the idea of excavation is very important. There is the building itself naturally but there is also the idea that the building comes directly from this excavation. There is the need to excavate, to produce a building. In Naples the interest is in the “co-presence” of underground quarries and buildings on the ground. Naturally there is a similar phenomenon in all towns but the two elements are usually separate.

Quarries were dug when towns were being established. An example is the Selinunte Temples in Sicily. Five to ten kilometres away from these temples are the quarries, where one can find abandoned pieces of column—very interesting to visit. But these elements are apart from each other. In Naples, however, you have, you perceive, you feel a simultaneous action. The quarrying and building are executed through a vertical axis. The constructive process can be seen and felt all in an instant. I do not like strange words but it is “synchronic”. The other situation is diachronic—there is a transfer of the materials for five, ten, one hundred kilometres. Here in Naples it is immediate—you excavate and you build. And in the building can be felt the presence of the building’s “mother”. This is so in many Neapolitan buildings. Often the excavation is used as a storage room, other times it is transformed into

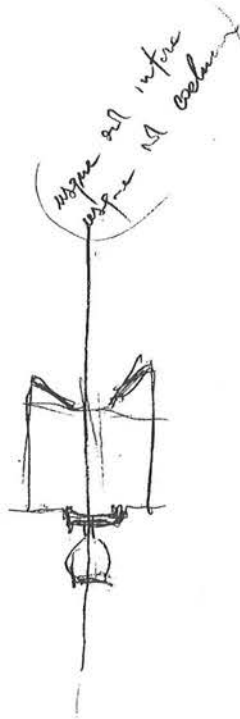
an annex of the house.

I was recently asked to design a house in Palazzolo Acreide, Sicily, on a site where there were small underground caves. I decided not to locate the house in the logical/practical position but directly above the caves, in a difficult position, in order to create this axis. This is the Neapolitan section. This is the relationship between my observation and the actual work which I always employ.

In another sense this section old Roman house: is an exploration of the houses in Pompeii and a relationship with the sky. That there is the excavated **impluvium**.

Underground there is a small (1.5-2 m) reservoir, not a cave, but the same concept. I have written a small article, **usque ad coelum**. This is the Latin definition of private property. Upon purchasing a piece of land in Roman times, your rights extended up to the stars and down to the underworld. They tried to express this right in their atrium, that is a windowless space in which all communication with the world is with the sky and the idea of house this is probably one of the strongest notions of house.

This sectional idea is often present in the architecture of Le Corbusier ... who visited Pompeii on his early travels. However the use of the idea and form are of course peculiar to Le Corbusier, complex and not an imitation of the Roman house, but the concept is the same, containing the presence of the sky.



makes reference to the idea of the extension of this idea of house. From Herculanium one can experience is not the case in this house but

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NR. Another important aspect of the history of Neapolitan architecture is the Baroque which exhibits a complex geometry. I can see, however, that you are not especially enthusiastic about the Baroque.

FV. I do not like the Baroque particularly. However the transition between the Renaissance and the Baroque is very strong. It is a moment, a terrible moment in which everything explodes. It is not a moment for normal architects. Michelangelo was the only great Baroque architect because he brought the explosion under his control. When the explosion becomes virtuosity, it becomes boring, becomes only a complicated game. However the moment of its creation is a great drama. But from the signs of this great drama, it becomes rhetorical and the Baroque which we know.

NR. How does this interest or rather belief in a necessary conflict inform the process of your work?

FV. Each project I do is different from all the others. I do not use a technique such as that used, for example, by Mario Botta. You know the sort of thing he will do before he does it—approximately of course—because he has a very clear, very consolidated language. In my work I prefer to “experience a way for each project.” It is a method by which I can still be a student. My interest necessarily coincides with the nature of the work. When I have a particular project to work on I inject some of my current interests into that work. For example, three or four years ago I was in Chicago and there I very much appreciated the buildings of the Chicago School, Louis Sullivan etc. I was also very interested in the connection between the Chicago School and the architecture of Adolf Loos because I’m sure that Loos took to Europe that which the States had understood of classical architecture.

There had been a major experiment in the United States adapting classical architecture to commercial necessity, that is to capitalist cities and of course Chicago was more advanced

in this area than any European city. I believe that Loos—but before Loos, Schinkel—started with this ability to transform the classical heritage to something which can be adapted to contemporary needs. Now in Tokyo I have a commission for some urban development and in this work I tried to explore this idea, to adapt all the traditions of the classical world as seen by the architects of modern industrial cities, Chicago and then by Loos in Vienna.

Another of my current interests is the pyramid. I must tell you that I was shocked when Bruno Zevi declared that the pyramid was not architecture. It *is* architecture. It is an excessive architecture. It is an architecture in which the interior space is tremendously small in relation to the wall—the mass. There is something extra-ordinary in the relationship between the penetration system and the form.

I am exploring the architecture of the pyramid in a commission for a new large open air theatre in Gibellina. The programme demands a very long stage and I have given it the form of a boat. The section of the entrance however recalls the section of the pyramid. The constructive system is gone. It is a pyramid built in a system different from that used by the ancients but the idea is the same. In this case I have the idea and not the constructive system.

It is a project of course very different from others. There is a possibility of using a consolidated language so that as soon as a client asks you to design a building you can use the linguistic solution. I do not like to work in this manner. I prefer to use the occasion, the project as an opportunity to “climb through architecture” and to reach a point possibly far removed from or near to architecture. In this case—3,000-4,000 years—but it is not a problem. Architecture is always the same. I try to take an idea and place this idea in relation to the different moments in which the idea appeared in the history of architecture. The pyramid is present in our work at the same moment as the Chicago buildings.