

Crucial words

---

Conditions for contemporary architecture  
Edited by Gert Wingårdh and Rasmus Wærn

Birkhäuser  
Basel · Boston · Berlin

“I have never loved working for others.” This is how Massimiliano Fuksas begins his self-examinatory description of work with his associates in the architects’ office. Fuksas, part of the renowned nomenclatura of celebrity architects, is brutally frank about the exacting, unfair conditions that put pressure on both his associates and himself personally. His description of the architect’s unremitting labour introduces this collection of *crucial words* for present-day architecture. Thirty answers later, the author Orhan Pamuk rounds off with a description of architecture as experience. Pamuk has written perhaps more than any other author about housing, and when he assembles his experiences dreams become more important than planned reality. *A building’s homeliness issues from the dreams of those who live in it.* Between these two poles – the architect’s brief but intensive wrestling match with the process, and the people who are to live in the buildings which will, hopefully, outlive their creators – extends everything we call architecture. Both genesis and perception demand their descriptions. There’s more to the picture than meets the eye.

To every age its words. Terms which attempt, in a few syllables, to describe intentions which many can agree on but few are able to pin down. Vagueness causes problems, both in the creation of architecture and in the understanding of it. “The obscurely uttered is the obscurely cogitated,” in the oft-quoted words of the nineteenth-century Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér. His meaning was clear: the bombastic artificiality of Neo-Romanticism obstructed the clarity which was the true purpose of art. Sincerity and genuine candour alone can point the way to real progress.

In his work, the architect uses more words than pictures. Although many of the words have a decisive bearing on the genesis of architecture, their meaning is often very unclear. There is nothing to be gained from such vagueness. To understand the preconditions of architecture – our own as well as other people’s – the key concepts must be brought out for scrutiny. It has not been our ambition to create a reference book that provides unambiguous answers of universal and eternal validity. The authors’ reflections on the keywords we have put forward are both subjective and temporary, and for that very reason are especially valid here and now. To shed light on these central concepts we have looked for authors with more than ordinary powers of observation. The mix of words and authors, needless to say, is personal: they point to phenomena and approaches which we also consider important to an understanding of the architecture we create.

Experience, nature and the body are recurrent perspectives in many essays and also in the illustrations we have chosen to elucidate the concepts. A fourth category, which might be termed the practitioner's reflections, centres round the conditions of planning. The political and commercial conditions for present-day architecture are often a more important precondition than the *genus loci*. They are seldom written in letters of fire on the finished building, but are a prerequisite for judging its qualities rightly.

Some texts describe shortcomings of today's architecture, such as atmosphere, memories or desire. Others – such as city branding, globalisation or wheelchairs – focus on the consequences of the new conditions in which architecture has to operate. Many writers draw the same conclusions: tiring of a perpetual hunt for novelty, they plead for the enduring values of architecture. It would be tempting to see in this a trend resembling the last century's disgust with civilisation, which was embraced not only by intellectuals but also by practising architects and planners generally. But this is not the case. Rather it is the gap between ideals and realities which nourishes the frustrating fact that far too much architecture is nowadays concerned with scoring points quickly. At the same time we know that there is always scope for projects with reflection, albeit perhaps on the margin.

How this margin can be widened is an underlying theme in many essays. The text on "landscape" quotes Le Corbusier, who wanted to see Arcadia in all directions. Paradise was to extend in every direction. Corbu's vision lived on under post-modernism, but no further. In today's world, that aspiration seems not just unattainable but also unnecessary. Today a passing dysfunction in places and cities can be seen, not always as a deficiency but instead as an asset. Not everything can or should be ordered and aestheticised. But when marginalised environments are taken well in hand, the disadvantage often presents expressive opportunities of a special kind.

Architecture as built experience provides the theme of many texts. Fragmentation of space may be difficult and sometimes unnecessary to influence, but fragmentation of time can be counteracted in a different way altogether. There is, as Juhani Pallasmaa writes, a quality in the ties between slowness and memory. In despair at having to create housing with no relation whatsoever to anything that had gone before, Orhan Pamuk abruptly curtailed an incipient career as architect. It took him a long time to realise that drawing can also comprehend a living relationship to history. If that experience had been

gained earlier, the world would have lost a great author. And possibly gained a great architect.

In the text on "transformation" we read that the big changes in history have seldom come out of processes intended to revolutionise. Call into question, perhaps, but less rarely asseverate. Consequently the great experiences await those who patiently go about reshaping a place, rather than tearing it all down. The book as a whole stresses the close relationship between the future and history. Experience is the foundation on which modern architecture is also fashioned. Even the most unambiguously forward-looking contribution in the whole book – Hans Ulrich Obrist on the future – has to step back a couple of paces in order to extrapolate a trend forwards.

Nature is the most powerful concept ever created for the description of culture. It stands, umbrella-like, over both landscape and organic matter; but body, desire, ornament and the slit also refer to Nature, in various senses. So too, indeed very much so, does ecology, which is present wherever the fateful issues of architecture are pointed out. In an uninhibited attempt to formalise environmental awareness, the term "organic" has come to denote everything from biomorphous blobs to rational organisation charts. There is every reason to relieve the concept of its subsidiary meaning of "quality".

The body's protection is architecture's *raison d'être*. In this way the focus on images of human beings rather than on buildings implies the taking of a stand. Human bodily and spiritual needs as a precondition of present-day architecture are indeed the focal point of several texts. The body is our social representative, but it also represents proportions and ideals. Just as people communicate with the world around them more through their orifices than with their actual body, so does the building. The slit, a reference word in its own right, is described as the *clou* of the mass. The absolute aperture, becoming more and more palpable as it narrows. The gender perspective is inescapable and is definitely among the most crucial. It could have been a reference word in its own right, but instead is now touched on in various texts, not least the one dealing with ornament, describing its shift from the erotic and sacred to compensation for lost beauty.

Some contributions describe the specific preconditions of Nordic and Swedish architecture, such as wheelchairs. Accessibility is a vital task in the conversion of Swedish buildings, but in addition to enabling the mobility-impaired to get in everywhere, this concern should also be capable of generating lasting changes in architecture. In the

context of globalised equality, such differences can provide new regional idiosyncrasies, just as post-war housing construction endowed Nordic architecture with an identity of its own.

The reflective practitioner reads and writes. Architecture, both our own and others, requires constant explanation. Conditions in the consumer society of the western world are often strikingly similar. As Carsten Thau writes, the requirement of being attractive does not necessarily mean being glamorous. Accordingly, the conditions in which a Swedish practice has to operate are describable from both an Italian and an American perspective. For all of us, it is a matter of finding oneself in a world of mass culture, in which references and concepts are key notions. If, in times gone by, these were derived from sources remote in time but near in space, the tendency today is to look far off in space but near in time. As a concept this is a logical effect of an internationalised image culture, but architecture does not have to confine itself to creating the expected. This book presents alternatives taken from both the workaday and the festive context.

To those reading this book as a manual, we would like to sum up the authors' experience right away: make buildings affording abundant opportunities for observation. To those reading the book as an attempted apologia for their own ambitions and those of others, we would offer the following cautionary words of Carl Sagan: "Precisely because of human fallibility, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

## Crucial words

---

Architects  
Atmosphere  
Body  
City Branding  
Competitions  
Computer  
Concept  
Corporate  
Desire  
Doers  
Europe  
Everyday  
Experiment  
Formalism  
Future  
Globalization  
Humanism  
Landscape  
Memory  
Modernity  
Nature  
Nordic  
Organic  
Ornament  
Photography  
Slit  
Technology  
Tradition  
Transformation  
Wheelchair  
Why

By Massimiliano Fuksas and Elisa Fuksas  
Architect, Italy, France and Germany  
Architect and filmmaker, Italy

First of all, I have never loved working for others. I have always been under the impression that being young implies a degree of arrogance and always being on the go, not having time for anything. You constantly feel that you have to do everything, immediately, because contrary to how it may seem, being under thirty is no excuse to wait for anything. Waiting is not part of the game, at least not this game.

I have a love-hate relationship with my collaborators, to whom I show both respect and irritation. This is like something you are really enthusiastic about which, once you achieve it, you immediately forget all about. It is an unbalanced and unfair relationship; I am both with and against them. I would like them to read my mind, without doubts in its interpretation and without second thoughts. At the same time, it is the last thing I am thinking about. It is a daily struggle, a war with unforeseeable truces, which of course I cannot allow. We cannot stop, not even for a moment. The mechanism is unstoppable, and whoever is part of it is on a treadmill. The people I work with every day, my closest colleagues, think that I am very hard to please. In actual fact, what I ask of them is simply cleverness, their cleverness. I cannot tolerate stupidity of actions taken in the full knowledge that such actions serve no purpose. I do not tolerate tryouts, temporary solutions, or the long way round to get somewhere. The masses of paper they print as an expression of self-congratulation: as if they needed an outsider to tell them that they have produced a good drawing, a good project, made an effective choice. Or the exact opposite. This is not architecture. Architecture is not about self-congratulation, it is about passion. Everything is in the head and in the eyes, not in finite, rendered images. They are not just fragments of a constantly moving constellation. They serve to communicate, tell a story, but they are not the story itself. What I want is the actual result. Somewhere else. The clarity of a solution which is immediately seen to be the right one, without having to ask others for their opinion. Without consultation. Without complications. Simplicity as evidence of truth. A good idea does not have to be mulled over. In my studio the only true rule is the need to move forward, to have quick reactions. Always to think about tomorrow, the next project, competition, dream. There is no time to chat, discuss and theorise. We must do. Experiment. See.

Academia is a safe world, but far away from the force of creation. From its anarchy. What I want to capture – and what I want them to capture – is the speed and immediacy of thought: the idea must not be filtered. Instead, its brutality and original power must be preserved.



They do not have to add anything, simply cut. Thousands of times I have pondered on a “method” of finding the right people to work with; many architects carry out genuine entrance tests, prepare quasi-official questionnaires and forms. They want to know everything about the candidates, schools, parents, insurance policies, income, right back to their ancestors.

But this is not the way I do things. My problem, and also my strength, is faith: I have always thought that everyone can be better than they think they are. Me included.

By Falk Jaeger

Professor of Theory of Architecture at Dresden

University of Technology, Germany

“From pure function comes abstract beauty,” exclaimed Erich Mendelsohn in 1924, not entirely enthusiastically, when faced with gigantic corn silos in Chicago with their “awkward, childlike forms, full of natural power, surrendered to pure need”. He highlighted a dilemma that modernism, which was evolving at that time, faced from the beginning and continues to this day. Abstract beauty is a noble aim, which nevertheless seems to be incompatible with humankind’s basic needs for atmosphere and security. Average citizens can no longer endure the lofty heights of the aesthetic sphere. They demand sentimental values, cosiness, and even comfort (which experts prefer to call “charm”). Ever since, architects have encountered this dilemma again and again and have tried to solve it. Adolf Loos, who believed ornament to be a waste of effort, at least gave his clients blazing marble and interestingly grained wooden surfaces to feast their eyes upon. Bruno Taut spiritedly resorted to coloured paint and Le Corbusier became ever more baroque in his later works.

There are still architects who would prefer a world they could furnish with building manifestos and soulless housing. Many are students of Oswald Mathias Ungers, the exponent of “architecture as science”, who turned many a house into an uninhabitable work of art, into a perfect artefact radiating spatial coldness.

There are not even idealistic proportions such as the golden section or Fibonacci series, nor the metric, Euclidean space, which would stimulate people. What modernism lacks is topological space with human interactions and an atmosphere that speaks to all the senses. This means an acoustic atmosphere. An atmosphere of light and colour. An atmosphere of materials with their haptic, sensual qualities, which encourage us to touch and feel.

The advanced field of light composition, as mastered by Le Corbusier and Paul Rudolph, has gone out of fashion. And what Leon Battista Alberti propagated in the fifteenth century, namely that light and shadows can spiritually change space, is still compelling.

Architecture, even that of the perfectionists of modernism, feels cold and sterile and is often deadly boring. Their works do not lack “noble beauty”, but they remain “without interest” as described by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Detail and finish are refined to the highest perfection, but even significant structures only rarely succeed in generating emotive spaces and comforting atmospheres. Meanwhile, others have no qualms about helplessly reviving grandmother’s flowery wallpaper and grandfather’s wing chair,





because they are unable to overcome the deficit in any other way. “Architecture arouses sentiments. The architect’s task, therefore, is to make these sentiments more precise,” proposed Adolf Loos in 1925. His advice has been forgotten.

It lies in the soulless perfection of industrial production of aluminium windows, glass doors and steel furniture. It lies in the computerised, serial design methods, which offer standard solutions as a rapid answer and thus do not exactly hinder individual ideas, but do not trigger them either. Only a few architects initially build working models to check the proportions, spatial effects and incidences of light of their designs. Many leave the task of creating an atmosphere to the construction company or the users themselves. Atmosphere is the most powerful factor in experiencing architecture, and therefore also in forming an overall assessment, because it touches upon feelings and emotions. However, this factor is ignored or only used unknowingly by most architects. Generating atmospheres has a lot to do with the theatre, with the knowledge of directorial effects of light, colours and materials – in the eyes of many architects a frivolous career.

Nonetheless, during the founding of modernism, there were theoreticians like the herald of glass architecture Paul Scheerbart, who, in 1914, while tirelessly arguing on emotional levels, advocated glass architecture filled with colourful light, because of its atmospheric qualities.

Abstinence disguised as respectability is based on a dread of emotionality, which has always been accompanied by strong colours. Colours belong to those feelings, which everyone is ready to experience spontaneously and decisively. Whoever builds with colour exposes himself to spirited, at times unrestrained, criticism. Additionally, every person reacts differently to colours and surprising spatial creations. You can never please everyone. As long as architects direct their attention exclusively to the observation of functional and economical constraints or bloodless studies on architectural theory, or else erect spectacular architectural sensations, without really worrying about the wishes and needs of the user, acceptance of modern contemporary architecture among the wider population will remain low.

By Axel Sowa

Editor-in-chief of *l'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, France

We do not know what the body is *in itself*. What is certain is that as long as it is healthy and functional it can be lived in easily. Yet in most cases the body remains hidden from its user. In the dark of the moment that has been lived, the body itself hardly manifests itself. Direct physical existence only becomes a puzzle when you start analysing it. You can bring the body to life with the aid of cameras, scanners or X-ray machines. Yet in the end all these aids actually remove us from the body. Probing, dissecting and analytical questioning cut through the impenetrable self-evidence of the body. Communicable knowledge of the body can only be expected at a distance from the body. In order to get it to speak, interpret it, understand it, impart its concept, we use systems of symbols, e.g. anatomical diagrams or ergonomic graphs. These symbol systems socialising the body presuppose agreement, convention, typification and coding, which in turn becomes an abstraction, a symbol for something else. The functionalised body of the worker, the seductive body of the advertisement, the emaciated body of the drought victim, become models, ciphers of mass communication. “By and large,” says Jean-Luc Nancy, “we only know and understand the typical body, we can only imagine it that way. The body, where it is irrelevant whether it is *here*, whether it is the *here* or *there* of a place, and where it is much more important that it acts as the steward or curator of a sense”.<sup>(1.)</sup>

Moreover, the body is always coded in terms of its possible applicative links. In recent architectural representations, the anthropomorphic bag figures were replaced by images of dynamic sporting contemporaries. The photo-realistic image of the body of anonymous users, consumers or passers-by is incorporated into the architectural drawing to demonstrate that the satisfaction of the “average human being” is taken into consideration in the projected environment. As Hans Belting has shown, there is a close link between the body image and the human image.<sup>(2.)</sup> The body images which have also represented the corresponding human images are as changeable as that which, in the course of history, has been understood as the “human being”. The body images have represented the incarnation of God (the Gospels), the ideal proportions of a cosmic harmony (Leonardo da Vinci), the presence of Shaman power (voodoo cult), the statistical mean value (Ernst Neufert) or the potential “designability” of the self (Cindy Sherman).

In February 1984 the journal *l'architecture d'aujourd'hui* published a monograph devoted to the work of Jean Nouvel, modest at

that time.<sup>(3.)</sup> Photographs were published together with an interview with the architect, which show Nouvel in various poses: Nouvel in bed with his favourite read, Nouvel in thought, or Nouvel vested with the attributes of a producer or critic. Here the image of the architect's body is used playfully as a means of social interaction and accompanies the interview text. The body of the architect is given the opportunity to enter the media and is stage-managed, clothed and arranged especially for this purpose. In hindsight, Nouvel turns out to be a visionary. Representations of the bodies of architects can now be found in the advertising for building components, in brochures announcing congresses, on the title pages of Spanish specialist journals, and wherever the architectural spectacle creates such a stir that a public, no matter how indifferent, can no longer escape it. The almost unlimited possibility of duplication of body images is used not only by film stars but also by all architects who want to make their mark. The omnipresence of their images not only attracts attention but also projects a semblance of intimacy. But what is the purpose of this obtrusive approach of Jean, Jacques, Zaha, Norman, Massimiliano, Frank and Daniel? What purpose is served by the permanent photographic presence of people whom we never see in everyday life? What is their significance?

Our present star system is definitely a body problem. Individual bodies make their presence felt. They stand out from the closed corpus of their professional status. Through the media machine they are repelled by the hardness of prosaic everyday life. Released from the disciplinary limits of their corporation they enter into the orbit of spatial ubiquity. However, the impatience of the stars who still want to win fame before their death is as old as the profession of architecture itself. The mediatisation of the architect's body is not a new phenomenon. It appears early on in the writings and treatises of the Renaissance architects who wanted to establish their career as independent artists. In a historical outline Laurent Baridon showed that Jean Goujon or Philibert de l'Orme played to the gallery in the frontispiece of their published works.<sup>(4.)</sup> By taking up the *topos* of the Dinocrates figure justified by Vitruvius, says Baridon, the architects lay claim to social and technical power.

In this case the body image has at least two components. First, it announces the physical, unique existence of the author, who is served by his or her self-portrait as a token of his or her work. At the same time the individual body is also a constituent of a social body, a

new learned profession which is released from the bonds of the craft guilds and therefore relies upon confidence-building measures. Here the body image establishes the link between work, personality and professional ethos. It is the medium for justifying individual and professional reputation. The first body images published and circulated by the architects of the Renaissance serve to protect a proposed programme. They form the basis of a new discipline. The calculation has been done: the most important representatives of the profession were then granted access to royal houses and academies.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the reproduction of body images, busts and portraits of architects remain bound by the disciplinary limits of the profession. For centuries the individual architect's body has been provided with the tools of his or her trade - the circle, the rolled-up plan or the model, for the purposes of representation. The forms of the representation did not change until the second half of the nineteenth century. Since the advent of new consumer behaviour, simulated by illustrated journals and by the specialist trade in fashion and luxury, bodies have been under pressure. They must still be based on models, but these models change from one season to the next. Physical appearance is no longer a misfortune. It becomes the object of conscious, individual choice. A new type of self-production is created with the figure of the dandy. The dandy, who through striking clothing and behaviour makes clear that he places no particular value on social respect, provokes the bourgeoisie to reject him, and manoeuvres himself into *splendid isolation*. Through crazy stylisations for the production of extemporaneity and independence, the body is now brought into play by criticizing established norms.<sup>(5.)</sup>

Initially the architects followed the model of Baudelaire, the "flaneurs" and absinth drinkers only timidly and to this extent their appearance no longer needed follow corporative rules. The image of the body - such as that of Mackintosh or Morris - could be freely selected, and now served to represent the *persona* of the creator. The individualisation of the pose and of outward appearance opened up a new game with expectations and customer requirements. As bourgeois rituals and accepted truths faded in time, the architect could no longer satisfy a constant demand. He had to risk the new and play the role of the avant-gardist. In demonstrative freedom from tension the architect showed that he is not impressed by the new. Like the lookout for a reconnaissance party, he first looked at what is new and then created it himself. The protagonists of the so-called heroic