

Continued Building

Albert Kirchengast

**Continued Building on the Village,
the Settlement, the City**

A Plea

Birkhäuser

Basel

“Isn’t everything like it never was?” Botho Strauß

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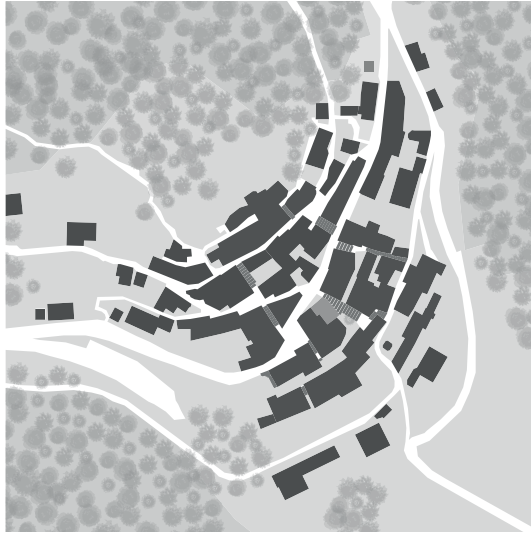
3 The Presence of History

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Monte, Val di Muggio/Ticino, location plan with house
Renovation Jonathan Sergison

Resistance

The short text entitled “Resistance” accompanies a monograph that was published in 2002, when the work of Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates already enjoyed international attention. The manifesto of the two architects is found at the end of the magazine, illustrated by just two images: of Joseph Beuys’s legendary felt suit and of an anonymous brick wall set in an English landscape. The latter image appears so dusky on the paper that the mood is strangely enchanting – as if night is already falling. The grayish tone and the rawness evoke the aura of the timelessly old, unplastered wall, built of gently weathered stones laid in simple courses. We peer, with the two architects, into a corner, where the wall with its beautiful coping changes direction. Our thoughts drift to this place; we feel as if we have been transported to an archaic quadrangle. Animated, towering broad-leafed trees surround the enclosing wall, which restrains the greenery by setting a boundary. The walled space is dominated by a tidily mowed lawn. This is a primeval scene, a *hortus conclusus*, a concrete symbol, and an archaic spatial element, the limitation of the human domain through the act of joining together small bricks to form a wall. Somewhere in the distance, out of shot, stands the house.

The eponymous Resistance, which is so important to the pair and underlies the close relationship between their architecture, anonymous building, and art, is inherent in this setting. It is filled with curious energy – generated by this focus on the elementary materiality of a wall. And it is, of course, more than this: “Architecture is often both object and subject but it may also embody continuity and a re-affirmation of place. It may recognise the imperfection in daily phenomena.”¹ This observation of the incidental, of the initially unassuming, and this readiness to confront the everyday underlie their approach and their design. If we look for things, they appear to us: “This architecture contributes to an increased atmospheric density of a place and in this there lies an ultimate resistance to the artificial and the virtual.”² This is a statement on behalf of the analog, the built world: Place, phenomenon, and atmospheric density are the key terms. We could encounter such scenes ourselves in our daily lives, scenes capable of lending a presence to our thoughts and to our intentions. But these situations must be encountered, and then read; for only if they can be read, can they be shared. In other words, we choose to differentiate between the experience of such a wall and our own work – but would we still make this differentiation if we could learn to understand the atmosphere of such places as both specific and general, as part of our architectural sensibility?

And, hence, there is nothing coincidental or banal about this moment. It is fundamental, because we probably approach it in the same mood. It is the starting point for a phenomenological understanding of architecture and design. The special becomes visible in the ordinary. “Reading” is obviously an inadequate word for the necessary level of attentive devotion because there is no certainty



that any words can get us to the point at which we feel a physical connection. In this context, images are neither tricks nor surrogates but, rather, physical reminders, notes about what could happen if we refer to the elementary origins of architecture. It seems far from unimportant whether the things that we design are a reflection of our hands, ears, or eyes, etc. We intuitively understand that the hand-layered baked earth remains associated with the ground, even when it has assumed the form of a brick or a wall. This powerful example clearly concerns the multilayered continuity of a place, with which we develop an uncanny connection because, our awareness heightened, we encounter both the familiar and the alien. A wall, whose concreteness resonates as we stand before it, touch it, feel it. Anyone who cannot summon up this sensibility is missing something. It is a sensation stimulated by the clever choice of a photograph and underlined by words, but all this is really grounded in the concreteness that is conveyed because we feel drawn to it. This is connected with the imaginary qualities that we also expect in such a place, which hint at its known, suspected, unknown, and yet somehow still shared history – as well as the possible future that we create for it. This “forward-looking” perspective is unavoidably associated with the design process. And if this starts with the presence of things and with their inherent tension, then past and future come together in a concrete way in the experience of *now*. We experience the calmness of the existing as a dimension. And naturally, elsewhere, its lack of calmness.

Felt and brick: The concreteness of objects, which they communicate when they achieve a presence that awakens our attention, combined with a materiality that absorbs both the time at which they

were made and the period during which they exist, transforms a simple wall into a work of art. Respect is generated by our awareness of the special qualities of such an everyday object; it is its ability to *move* us in certain situations that guarantees that we will show it the appropriate respect. Or, put another way: Empathy unites spirit and body. The approach also embraces audacity, as represented by the felt suit. This is the work of an artist, whose art transforms the general into the specific, and embodies ideas – just like the above wall. The wall and the suit are united by the work on and with existing objects that enables us to understand ourselves. The fact that such an approach is in contradiction with the dominant practice is probably a consequence of the intensified professionalisation of a discipline, whose discourse has become somewhat remote and self-referential. Even if the design studios of certain universities are increasingly seeking to establish a link with the forms of the past or to appreciate “simple” materiality, and even if Continued Building has become a social issue in times of crisis – whether as a method of *reuse* or as a creative impulse – this is still not the same as employing the impact of the here and now as the starting point of the design, as causatively linking the design process with the Continued Building of the material presence in the space. But why is this so important and not just another way of designing?

Let us return to the place, to the concrete object. We learn that this is the kitchen garden of a Georgian country house. A house that is about as old as Jonathan Sergison’s own house, of which we will soon speak. The dating is anchored in its history; we see a three-and-a-half-meter-high wall bracing itself against the topography; gaining character from the rising and falling lines. The beauty of

this extremely simple structure is derived from the way in which it reveals the flowing landscape, to which it now belongs. This mutual affirmation transforms the wall into a powerful experience and an act of synergy with its setting: "In these ways the landscape has had a decisive impact on the ultimate character of the wall, with the wall making the landscape more visible on the one hand and the material of the wall becoming more potent on the other. It is as if the landscape has set free the true nature of the wall being both flawed and monumental at the same time."³ We could also say that a place first emerges from this type of poetic interaction with nature – an interaction that we experience, whether it was intended or not. Poetry means: *hervorbringen* (to bring forth). To give space to what is already *there*. Of course others have been reflecting on this for some time. Christian Norberg-Schulz focused on special places as a means of suggesting how we could sharpen our phenomenological understanding of architecture. He speaks famously of the "Genius Loci" – the spirit of a place – as a way of evoking its prevailing quality, which we can then strengthen – or weaken, or perhaps even destroy. His specific focus is pre-industrial landscapes, composite forms that include houses, farmsteads, and cities and are the product of a particular culture. We experience these places as "phenomena." The Norwegian architect uses this term to describe the interplay of architecture with the natural topography, vegetation, and weather conditions, etc. But this is an interplay that *shows itself*. Norberg-Schulz underlines this at a decisive point with the help of a poem, Georg Trakl's "Winterabend."⁴ This poem is also about the sharing of an apparently mundane moment; frugality that suddenly turns into the opposite, an existential transformation that becomes

real as soon as we experience it through such verse. The poetry of a moment transforms concrete things into architectural space that interacts decisively with the natural realm, into significant details: threshold, laid table, fireplace, snow on the window, darkness ... someone is returning from a journey that has presented its share of challenges or, simply, from a walk, into a warm, brightly-lit home, which is transformed into an experience by the threshold, the door, the light and the warmth, the hunger and the tiredness, the restful sanctuary, the leaving outside of the rough weather, which now gives this place its meaning because there is something against which it can offer protection. The ordinary can turn into the extraordinary. This transformation requires particular attention. The task is to discover where these objects resonate with our disposition – or, in other words: to identify the moments that facilitate the existential everyday experiences that sustain and give meaning and direction to our own lives.

Generations after Norberg-Schulz's book, the two London architects Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates appear to be reformulating *genius loci* for today: "Buildings not only reshape the physical environment and therefore our view of spatial relationships, they also instil an emotive response, based upon association and memory. In this way building is communicative. If acted upon consciously, within a conceptual framework, architecture may go beyond programme and site by engaging with personal and collective experience of place and our position in the world."⁵ Building a place means caring for it and giving it time to find itself. The quote is taken from a key text written by the pair that addresses the subject of *tolerance*. They also attach great importance to the precise use of words, as