CRITIQUE OF THE MODERNIST REASON IN PERUVIAN ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract. Reason has been the cornerstone of one of the movements that has had the greatest repercussions in the architectural world. What its promoters have understood as rational defined the movement's formal proposal and design. However, what did Modernism profess that was really rational? The analysis and critique of one of its foundations can reveal which things were omitted, and the reasons why the training of a whole generation of designers was necessary. Self-categorized as rational, and therefore naming its design style (that denies and ignores all the cultural and historical background of a community) as rational generates consequences that in some cases will be irreversible. On the other hand, its imposition in countries that fight for development and want to be treated as modern will endanger years of work and accumulation of local knowledge that, if nothing is done, will eliminate the diverse relationships with the environment that now exists around the world.

1.   Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century an architectural ideology, self-referred to as modern, led the development of what they called a rational architecture (Benevolo, 1971). However, was "*the liberation of architecture from a welter of ornament*" (Gropius, 1965: 23) really rational? What was behind of this affirmation: *"new synthetic substances — steel, concrete, glass — are actively superseding the traditional raw materials of construction"* (Gropius, 1965)? Criticism — from Greek *kritikos* 'able to make judgments' and *krinein* 'to separate, decide' — can help us realize if what has been called reason in architecture truly fulfills its meaning.

First, we should define what is rational or, basically, what is reason per se. For I. Kant (1998), it is the faculty of every human being to generate arguments, establish judgments and identify concepts; according to the Oxford English dictionary (2018) it's the power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgments logically; consequently N. Kompridis (2000) synthesizes it as the set of practices that contributes to the opening and preservation of knowledge. Thus, we can deduce that reason implies a very complex cognitive process, so complicated that on several occasions it is catalogued as an exclusive human quality[1]. Therefore, rational is something made by reason, a very complex human faculty that more than obviate variables, accepts them and organizes them coherently.

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[1] However in animal psychology this statement is being debated.

Now, if reason is one of the most outstanding characteristics in human beings, is it possible that it was not present in products elaborated by them throughout history, such as their tools, food and architecture to affirm that a rational architecture just exists since 20th century?

Was looking for shelter in a storm and finding it in a cave not a rational action? It would be unfair to say that settling dwellings on the slopes to avoid wasting fertile land does not implies a cognitive process based on reason, as well as decorating buildings with engravings or physical elements as a way of communication to future generations' knowledge and identity. Primitive is something made for the first time, not by primates.

2.   Imposition of an ideology

Has architecture been away from reason to talk about rationalism just since the 20th century? Someone without any historical basis could affirm such a thing, and coming from the Modernist Movement —self-cataloged as anti-historicist movement— is understandable (Salingaros, 2014).

The importance of reason in making architecture has been identified since its first manifestations, proof of that is its presence in one of the first texts on architecture that emphasize the use of reason for its understanding and work. In his *Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius (1997) argued that architects should explain their works based on historical and symbolic arguments, since they authentically represent the rational process involved in making architecture.

Now, in the Peruvian context we have many examples, societies throughout our territory used a fine cognitive capacity to make the great architectural works that amaze us today or, are we going to believe that they didn't use reason to make them? Their orientations, constructive systems, communicative qualities are not a clear example of using reason?

Also, the arrival of modernist architecture in Peru was in the mid 1940's when it was introduced around the world as a solution to rebuild or make better new cities (Freire, 2013a). Perhaps many of modernist proposals for European cities were rejected there – like Le Corbusier's proposal to demolish two square miles of downtown Paris (Lubin, 2013) – but they found in the south hemisphere a place to make them true. For example a whole new Modernist city was built in Brazil (Holston, 1989; Moore, 2015), as well as many modernist buildings in India by Le Corbusier (Almeida, 2013; Glancey, 2015) and Africa (Wainwright, 2015) calling them modern or avant-garde architecture. In that sense, some Latin American countries embrace them just to show the world they could be progressives and modern (Guillén, 2004; Lu, 2011; Sæther, 2015). Those ideas were supported by one of the most important institution to promote Modernism around the world: The CIAM (Mumford, 2002). Although, first manifestations of Modernist architecture in Peru showed a symbolic hybridity with traditional and local languages – works of Soane and Malachowski are examples of that (Bentín, 2014; Ludeña, 2015) , W. Gropius's visit to Peru in 1953 would sentence the total breakup by saying to Peruvian architects: "*Look for the authentic regional expression, without however relying upon old symbols and superficial details*" (Freire, 2013b).

However, was it rational to impose an architectural style that promoted a rejection of local customs and traditions by cataloging them as delayed or not avant-garde, thus jeopardizing hundreds of years of evolutionary improvement of mechanisms

and processes that worked in harmony with populations and context in general? Was it rational to promote the construction of an architecture that needed a developed industry —like the European or North American— but realizing that in the middle of the process we were in an inferior level so importation of a large scale of machinery, materials, etc., was imposed to build them? I think despite the good intentions to develop the nation, they were copying the form but not the science behind it[2].

So, why did they decide to describe their architecture as rational? They thought that by dispensing with elements they called useless, unproductive and superficial, they could release architecture from their past and develop it focusing on functionality (Gropius, 1965). Nevertheless, what they understood as function was no more than organization and distribution of program economically, omitting the broad and complex concept of the word —an activity that is natural to the purpose of a person or thing—, for this reason, limiting the meaning of function in architecture only to what is understood by them is to assume that there is no function in the symbolic or aesthetic aspect or, in other words, to symbolize, communicate and express is not a function.

Even so, it could be said that they wanted to take architecture to a level where man uses only his reason to exist, but was it reasonable to ignore the socio-cultural, climatic, political and economic context? Peru, by that time, was one of the poorest country of the region with high infant mortality rate and low industrial production (Caetano & de-Armas, 2015). To face those problems the application of foreign solutions was presented as the only thing we can do, however it brought a strong dependency not only economically but also politically and culturally (Quijano, 2014).

In addition, believing that by suppressing ornament all the symbolic aspect in architecture would be gone as well was naive. Given that, even their way of making architecture had a meaning, in the end it became the very concept they fought against: one more style —the International Style— (Hitchcock & Johnson, 1932). The quality of communicating, symbolize, etc., is inherent in architecture and its presence throughout history sustains it (Salingaros, 2006).

3.   Using language is rational

Consequently, what would be rational in architecture then? How could it be rational? Wouldn't it be — in the broadest part of the answer - assuming that its entire process must be coherent with human thinking and behavior, trying to achieve their well-being in every aspects? Therefore, suppressing something in order to simplify an architectural problem should not be catalogued as rational. Being rational would be to get into the problem and formulate a solution through cognitive processes, in other words, thinking.

In this context, the tool that allows us to use reason and to think is language. It allows us to shape our ideas and elaborate the most complex concepts. Therefore, communication is one of the activities that makes us use reason or the most rational we have.

Then, if we try to eliminate it from architecture, wouldn't we be eliminating much of the rational in it? Although it seems contradictory, 'rational Modernism' movement tried to do it, it erased all decoration and ornament without any scientific

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[2] Modernist architects also copied the form of the machines that fascinated them but not the scientific processes that supported them. Salingaros, Nikos. Op. Cit.; 2006; p 68-69.

basis, just based on opinions such as "*the ornament is a crime*" (Loos, 1908) or "*decoration is of a sensorial and elementary order, as is colour, and is suited to simple races, peasants and savages* […] *The peasant loves ornament and decorates his walls*" (Le Corbusier, 1986).

In this regard, referring function to the organizational aspect of program is imprecise, as well as to categorize as modern an architecture with a minimalist and anti-historicist language. Since it is encouraged in several Peruvian universities that architecture is a discipline you can only learn by making (Córdova-Ramírez, 2017), an extent part of architecture is denied, the questioning capacity and everything that involves thinking or reasoning is suppressed at the expense of their inhabitants or those who are exposed to perceive it (Hosey, 2015).

4.   Conclusion

The link between reason and science, its method, its ability to help us comprehend our complex reality through research, formulate ideas and question them through objective judgments is being ignored because it is incoherent and absurd that complex human reasoning could formulate such a sterile and minimal architecture (Salingaros, 2006). In that sense, if reason is what characterizes us as a species, why do we keep making mistakes? Why something that we thought was logically correct turns out not to be? Or maybe accepting these flaws and taking responsibility for our mistakes makes us evolve as a specie, be more human and be more rational. Then, we should doubt everything we do, question it and criticize it.

Peru is one of the many cases in the world where Modernist architecture was imposed and legitimized as the only way to improve our environments and in our desire to make our 'underdeveloped' nations a better place —such as an European or North American countries— we set aside part of our identity and architectural tradition that took us years to develop. This has been the greatest question of the developing countries: How can we progress, be modern, without abandoning our ancestral and local knowledge? The answer must start by accepting that we are different. Our climates, geographies and biodiversity have had a great influence on the constitution of our societies and just because they are different from Europeans does not mean that they are inferior. Our ways of building and material expressions that respond and relate to the environment is part of what defines our identity and how we understand life (Salingaros, 2018), an identity that we must not just protect but also value.

In this sense, architecture plays an important role in the constitution of an identity, how we perceive a street not only makes us create an image of a neighborhood or a city, it also makes us build an image of the people who live in there. If we don't protect what makes us different, if we keep allowing someone else to destroy our traditional places and local ways to configure the built environment, all our history and what our ancestors did will go with it.

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