Livio Vacchini: critical action versus beauty

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ABSTRACT. Basically, what we are suggesting in this communication is to reflect on concept of beauty from the work and thought of the Swiss architect Livio Vacchini (1933-2007). Far from pursuing the transmission of architect’s profession from philosophical terms like beauty, Vacchini proposes to analyze critically architecture -critical action- in order to propose new works. This point of view could become a pedagogical approach that raises the teaching of Architecture from the architecture works.

In this way, Livio Vacchini doesn’t aims to teach and get beauty but to examine how architecture is produced, how works that interested him -and us- have been done, with which concepts, what methods, what instruments, what paths and what has been achieved with all of this. The basic issue seems to be the analysis and communication of what are the general and specific resources that we acquire and accumulate as a cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS: Vacchini, criticism, architecture, beauty, works, analysis

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Any discussion about beauty as a general concept, applicable not only to architecture but to any human activity, starts with Plato. In the *Philebus*, Plato describes what we call "beautiful" as pure form and says that it is composed of lines, dots, measures, symmetries and even "pure colours". For Plato, beauty is, thus, the brightness of truth, the faithful reflection of its components. The reflection on these elements, its comprehensiveness, will have as a result pure beauty.

The beauty in these terms is not limited to a particular historical period and its presence can be found in the Roman world, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Classical and even in Modern times. In this way, the sensuous beauty of nineteenth-century bourgeois roots and the beauty in terms of constructive and functional sincerity, characteristic of the most radical avant-garde art, share the same origin. It is not strange, then, that we can find a similar aesthetic substrate in architectural discourses as far away as the one of Mies van der Rohe in their income as principal of the Illinois Institute of Technology, or G. Gromort developing in the "Essai sur la Théorie de l'Architecture", guide in the academician course at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1937 and 1940.

However, beyond the discussion of the origin of the term, we are interested in some reflection on the meaning and role of beauty in contemporary architecture and, specifically, in its relevance in the classrooms of schools of architecture. We should ask ourselves: what extent beauty is an objective of contemporary architecture?, which is its role in the curriculum aimed at obtaining a degree in architecture? Under this view, the figure of some contemporary architects, whose work and intellectual effort have thought about it, could serve us as a support and guidance. This is the case of Livio Vacchini (1933-2007), who has used the word beauty as a concept to confront his vision of architecture.

"Faced with these monuments one doesn’t cry out: 'How beautiful'. There is no beauty; there is totality, emotion, wit, madness, precision, monstrosity, horror."

With these words, Livio Vacchini defined the impression that those architectures that had accompanied him during his long career had always produced on him. Some of these architectures, different, timeless, geographically dispersed, were collected -posthumously- in a book recently published: *Masterpieces. Livio Vacchini* (Gustavo Gili, 2009). It reflects the intellectual legacy of an architect whose work never searched beauty, but always moving at its limits.

In this brief book, just sixty pages, are listed those architectural works that focused the attention of the Ticino's master and served as reference for his work: from Stonehenge in Wiltshire (3100-1600 B.C.) or the Parthenon in Athens (448-438 B.C.), to the Neue Nationalgalerie designed by Mies in Berlin (1965-68 A.F.). As pointed out by Carlos Martí Arís in the introduction of the posthumously book: "he observes the works with inquisitive eye, he
treats them without false reverence, he criticizes them and makes them specific questions on the profession of architect." These questions arise purely architectural issues: how does it delivers to the ground?, how does it relates to the near and far landscape?, which are the access mechanism?, how is organized the space, with which formal structure?, etc. (Fig.1, Fig.2)

In this way, Livio Vacchini doesn’t pursue teach and get the beauty but to examine how architecture is produced, how works that interested him –and us- have been done, with which concepts, what methods, what instruments, what paths and what has been achieved with all of this. The basic issue seems to be the analysis and communication of what are the general and specific resources that we acquire and accumulate as a cultural heritage. He is interested in deeping the systems and methods of project rather than on what produces beauty. Afterwards, architecture is well understood as a construction, that is, as a formal system where different material elements are related aimed at arranging a certain space and captures the light, a system that pursues its own internal coherence beyond the discernment of beauty they have been able to survive as cultural substrate throughout history.

This point of view pretend to find and understand the unchanged problems that architects handle from antiquity to nowadays: "(...) the history came to me then as a chain of events aimed at solving some common problems." In this sense, the great architectures with which Vacchini measured himself are those that propose the essential problems of the architect, the problems surrounding the function, the location and the construction. And so, when such problems arise, the architect must make a single coherent answer; a response which, as Vacchini’s own work, will not be characterized to be beautiful, but to be united, hoping to reconcile the different created problems.

It is against this task of reconciliation that the architect finds his profession. The architect's task changes, after that, into a critical action, an answer that brings new perspectives and new problems to those raised traditionally. In the idea of action is condensed the assertive capacity of the architect, his way of interpreting, clarifying and transforming reality through architectural form: "(...) Soon I realized that they can not be two identical actions, any action we do involves a certain degree of invention. I also realized that our work born from a critical operation from what already exists; the most fertile criticism is one in which we have the courage to question the masterpieces."

The architect, from a viewpoint necessarily personal and particular, shouldn’t seek to impose their own laws, their own label, but discovering the laws and deep relationships of the elements of the great architecture. Faced with the exacerbation of personal and quest for originality, we bet for the rigor of analysis and patience in the investigation of the rules of our own discipline.

Basically, what we are suggesting in this communication is to analyze the concept of beauty from the work and thought of the architect Livio Vacchini.
Vacchini’s architecture and ideas could become a pedagogical approach that raises the teaching of Architecture from the architectural works, from its methods and techniques. Far from pursuing the transmission of architect’s profession from philosophical terms like **beauty** (*venustas*), one has to analyze and study critically the architecture in order to propose new works, one has to produce a **critical action**. Previous experience of architecture becomes, then, an exemplary teaching tool, establishing close and deep ties with exemplary works of architectural history. This point of view seems to be the same Carlos Martí Arís proposes in the book’s introduction *Masterpieces. Livio Vacchini* when he states that: "Architecture is precisely what remains of that structure, despite the changes and the erosion of time: it is objective, capable of transcending the personal dimension and placed in a broader territory that the strict pursuit of beauty."

**Legends**

Fig.1.- Stonehenge, Wiltshire, United Kingdom, 3100-1600 BC  
Fig.2.- The Parthenon, Acropolis of Athens, Greece, 448-438 BC

**Bibliography**


**Biography**

Daniel García Escudero graduated in April 2004 as an architect from the Superior Technical School of Architecture in Barcelona, Spain, ETSAB. Received a grant from Technical University of Catalonia, UPC, for the training of university teachers between 2007 and 2010. Obtained Research Certificate (Diploma Estudios Avanzados, DEA) in November 2007. Between 2006 and 2009, received some grants to research at the Alvar Aalto Foundation and at Danmarks Kunstbibliotek. He has participated in several courses of Architectonical Projects Department and in the ETSAB’s Master: “Architecture: Project and criticism”. He has been a visiting professor in summer 2008 at the workshop "TE'TSAB 08 - Figueres, Europe's door". Currently, he is preparing his thesis “Space and route in Alvar Aalto” (“Espacio y recorrido en Alvar Aalto”).